

On a visit to Delhi with his parents, Mukesh spent two crowded hours at the zoo. He was dazzled by the many colourful birds, fascinated by the reptiles, charmed by the gibbons and chimps and awestruck by the big cats... There was no zoo in the small town of Dehra where he lived. And the jungle was some way across the river-bed. So, as soon as he got home, he decided that he would have a zoo of his own.

Mukesh did not realize the chaos—and the fun—that his plans would bring to the Indian town where he lived with his friends Suraj and Ranji, Koki and Amir . . . These characters and others come in and out of the stories in this book. There is the day of 'The Big Race' when we see a closely fought contest between . . . three beetles! 'Koki's,

Song' describes the almost unspoken friendship between Koki and the boy by the stream, whose plaintive flute-playing so enthralls her. And 'The King and the Tree Goddess' is told as a legend, warning of man's threat to nature. These are just some of the stories which make up the rich and varied collection in *The Road to the Bazaar*.

Ruskin Bond not only brings to life a town in northern India capturing the scenery, the people, the atmosphere—but also shows that children are the same the world over.

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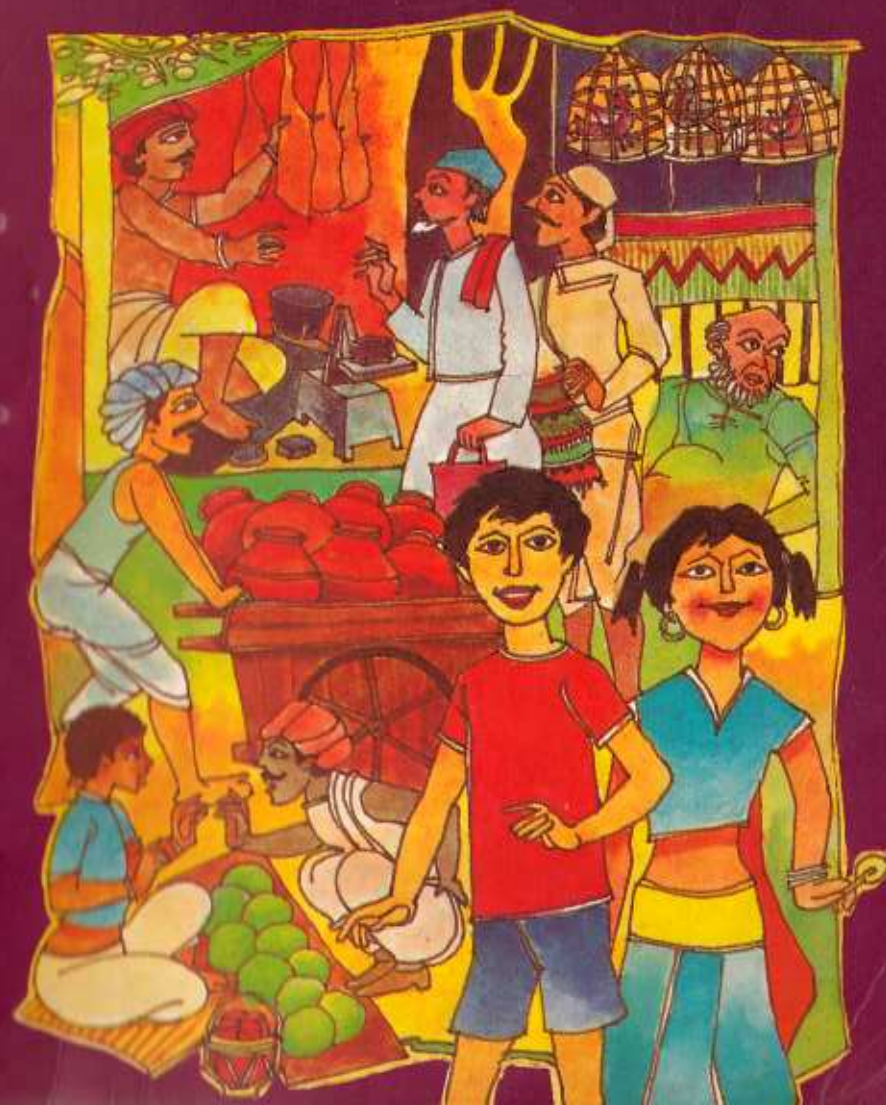
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RUSKIN BOND

THE ROAD TO THE BAZAAR

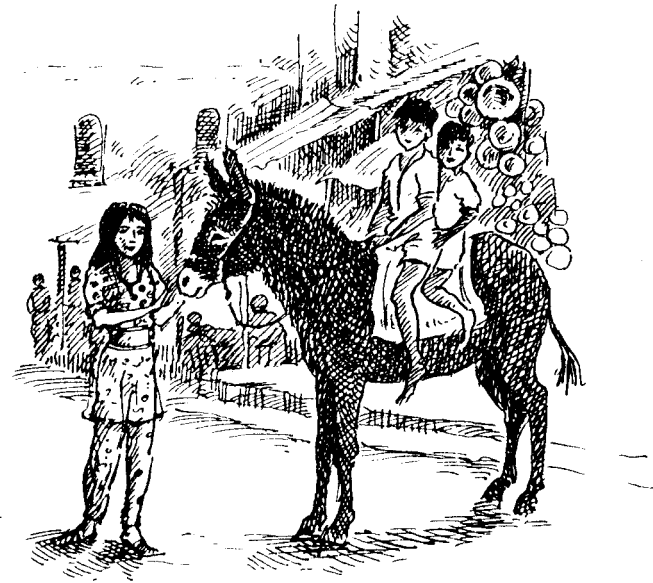


THE ROAD TO THE BAZAAR

Ruskin Bond

The Road to the Bazaar

ILLUSTRATED BY VALERIE LITTLEWOOD



Rupa & Co.

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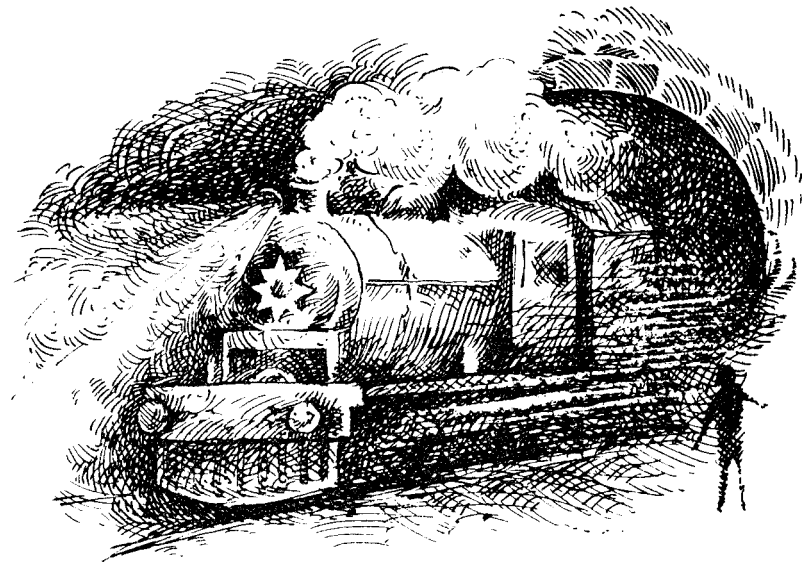
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1 The Tunnel

It was almost noon, and the jungle was very still, very silent. Heat waves shimmered along the railway embankment where it cut a path through the tall evergreen trees. The railway lines were two straight black serpents disappearing into the tunnel in the hillside.

Suraj stood near the cutting, waiting for the midday train. It wasn't a station, and he wasn't catching a train. He was waiting so that he could watch the steam-engine come roaring out of the tunnel.

He had cycled out of Dehra and taken the jungle path until he had come to a small village. He had left the cycle there, and walked over a low, scrub-covered hill and down to the tunnel exit.

Now he looked up. He had heard, in the distance, the shrill whistle of the engine. He couldn't see anything, because the train was approaching from the other side of the hill; but presently a sound like distant thunder issued from the tunnel, and he knew the train was coming through.

A second or two later, the steam-engine shot out of the tunnel, snorting and puffing like some green, black and gold dragon, some beautiful monster out of Suraj's dreams. Showering sparks left and right, it roared a challenge to the jungle.

Instinctively, Suraj stepped back a few paces. Waves of hot steam struck him in the face. Even the trees seemed to flinch from the noise and heat. And then the train had gone, leaving only a plume of smoke to drift lazily over the tall Shisham trees.

The jungle was still again. No one moved.

Suraj turned from his contemplation of the drifting smoke and began walking along the embankment towards the tunnel.

The tunnel grew darker as he walked further into it. When he had gone about twenty yards it became pitch black. Suraj had to turn and look back at the opening to reassure himself that there was still daylight outside. Ahead of him, the tunnel's other opening was just a small round circle of light.

The tunnel was still full of smoke from the train, but it would be several hours before another train came through. Till then, the cutting belonged to the jungle again.

Suraj didn't stop, because there was nothing to do in the tunnel and nothing to see. He had simply wanted to

walk through, so that he would know what the inside of a tunnel was really like. The walls were damp and sticky. A bat flew past. A lizard scuttled between the lines.

Coming straight from the darkness into the light, Suraj was dazzled by the sudden glare and put a hand up to shade his eyes. He looked up at the tree-covered hillside and thought he saw something moving between the trees.

It was just a flash of orange and gold, and a long swishing tail. It was there between the trees for a second or two, and then it was gone.

About fifteen metres from the entrance to the tunnel stood the watchman's hut. Marigolds grew in front of the hut, and at the back there was a small vegetable patch. It was the watchman's duty to inspect the tunnel and keep it clear of obstacles. Every day, before the train came through, he would walk the length of the tunnel. If all was well, he would return to his hut and take a nap. If something was wrong, he would walk back up the line and wave a red flag and the engine-driver would slow down. At night, the watchman lit an oil-lamp and made a similar inspection of the tunnel. Of course, he would not stop the train if there was a porcupine on the line. But if there was any danger to the train, he'd go back up the line and wave his lamp to the approaching engine. If all was well, he'd hang his lamp at the door of his hut and go to sleep.

He was just settling down on his cot for an afternoon nap when he saw the boy emerge from the tunnel. He waited until Suraj was only a metre or so away and then

said: "Welcome, welcome. I don't often have visitors. Sit down for a while, and tell me why you were inspecting my tunnel."

"Is it your tunnel?" asked Suraj.

"It is," said the watchman. "It is truly my tunnel, since no one else will have anything to do with it. I have only lent it to the Government."

Suraj sat down on the edge of the cot.

"I wanted to see the train come through," he said. "And then, when it had gone, I thought I'd walk through the tunnel."

"And what did you find in it?"

"Nothing. It was very dark. But when I came out, I thought I saw an animal – up on the hill – but I'm not sure, it moved off very quickly."

"It was a leopard you saw," said the watchman. "My leopard."

"Do you own a leopard too?"

"I do."

"And do you lend it to the Government?"

"I do not."

"Is it dangerous?"

"No, it's a leopard that minds its own business. It comes to this range for a few days every month."

"Have you been here a long time?" asked Suraj.

"Many years. My name is Sunder Singh."

"My name's Suraj."

"There is one train during the day. And there is one train during the night. Have you seen the night-mail come through the tunnel?"

"No. At what time does it come?"

"About nine o'clock, if it isn't late. You could come

and sit here with me, if you like. And after it has gone, instead of going to sleep I will take you home."

"I'll ask my parents," said Suraj. "Will it be safe?"

"Of course. It is safer in the jungle than in the town. Nothing happens to me out here. But last month, when I went into town, I was almost run over by a bus."

Sunder Singh yawned and stretched himself out on the cot. "And now I am going to take a nap, my friend. It is too hot to be up and about in the afternoon."

"Everyone goes to sleep in the afternoon," complained Suraj. "My father lies down as soon as he's had his lunch."

"Well, the animals also rest in the heat of the day. It is only the tribe of boys who cannot, or will not, rest."

Sunder Singh placed a large banana-leaf over his face to keep away the flies, and was soon snoring gently. Suraj stood up, looking up and down the railway tracks. Then he began walking back to the village.

The following evening, towards dusk, as the flying foxes swooped silently out of the trees, Suraj made his way to the watchman's hut.

It had been a long hot day, but now the earth was cooling, and a light breeze was moving through the trees. It carried with it the scent of mango blossoms, the promise of rain.

Sunder Singh was waiting for Suraj. He had watered his small garden, and the flowers looked cool and fresh. A kettle was boiling on a small oil-stove.

"I am making tea," he said. "There is nothing like a glass of hot tea while waiting for a train."

They drank their tea, listening to the sharp notes of the tailor-bird and the noisy chatter of the seven-sisters.

As the brief twilight faded, most of the birds fell silent. Sunder Singh lit his oil-lamp and said it was time for him to inspect the tunnel. He moved off towards the tunnel, while Suraj sat on the cot, sipping his tea. In the dark, the trees seemed to move closer to him. And the night-life of the forest was conveyed on the breeze – the sharp call of a barking deer, the cry of a fox, the quaint *tonk-tonk* of a nightjar. There were some sounds that Suraj didn't recognise – sounds that came from the trees, creakings and whisperings, as though the trees were coming to life, stretching their limbs in the dark, shifting a little, flexing their fingers.

Sunder Singh stood inside the tunnel, trimming his lamp. The night sounds were familiar to him and he did not give them much thought; but something else – a padded footfall, a rustle of dry leaves – made him stand still for a few seconds, peering into the darkness. Then, humming softly to himself, he returned to where Suraj was waiting. Ten minutes remained for the night-mail to arrive.

As Sunder Singh sat down on the cot beside Suraj, a new sound reached both of them quite distinctly – a rhythmic sawing sound, as of someone cutting through the branch of a tree.

"What's that?" whispered Suraj.

"It's the leopard," said Sunder Singh. "I think it's in the tunnel."

"The train will soon be here," said Suraj.

"Yes, my friend. And if we don't drive the leopard out of the tunnel, it will be run over and killed. I can't let that happen."

"But won't it attack us if we try to drive it out?" asked

Suraj, beginning to share the watchman's concern.

"Not this leopard. It knows me well. We have seen each other many times. It has a weakness for goats and stray dogs, but it will not harm us. Even so, I'll take my axe with me. You stay here, Suraj."

"No, I'm coming with you. It will be better than sitting here alone in the dark!"

"All right, but stay close behind me. And remember, there is nothing to fear."

Raising his lamp, Sunder Singh advanced into the tunnel, shouting at the top of his voice to try and scare away the animal. Suraj followed close behind; but he found he was unable to do any shouting. His throat was quite dry.

They had gone about twenty paces into the tunnel when the light from the lamp fell upon the leopard. It was crouching between the tracks, only five metres away from them. It was not a very big leopard, but it looked lithe and sinewy. Baring its teeth and snarling, it went down on its belly, tail twitching.

Suraj and Sunder Singh both shouted together. Their voices rang through the tunnel. And the leopard, uncertain as to how many terrifying humans were there in the tunnel with him, turned swiftly and disappeared into the darkness.

To make sure that it had gone, Sunder Singh and Suraj walked the length of the tunnel. When they returned to the entrance, the rails were beginning to hum. They knew the train was coming.

Suraj put his hand to one of the rails and felt its tremor. He heard the distant rumble of the train. And then the engine came round the bend, hissing at them,

THE ROAD TO THE BAZAAR

scattering sparks into the darkness, defying the jungle as it roared through the steep sides of the cutting. It charged straight at the tunnel, and into it, thundering past Suraj like the beautiful dragon of his dreams.

And when it had gone, the silence returned and the forest seemed to breathe, to live again. Only the rails still trembled with the passing of the train.

They trembled again to the passing of the same train, almost a week later, when Suraj and his father were both travelling in it.

Suraj's father was scribbling in a notebook, doing his accounts. Suraj sat at an open window staring out at the darkness. His father was going to Delhi on a business trip and had decided to take the boy along. ("I don't know where he gets to, most of the time," he'd complained. "I think it's time he learnt something about my business.")

The night-mail rushed through the forest with its hundreds of passengers. The carriage wheels beat out a steady rhythm on the rails. Tiny flickering lights came and went, as they passed small villages on the fringe of the jungle.

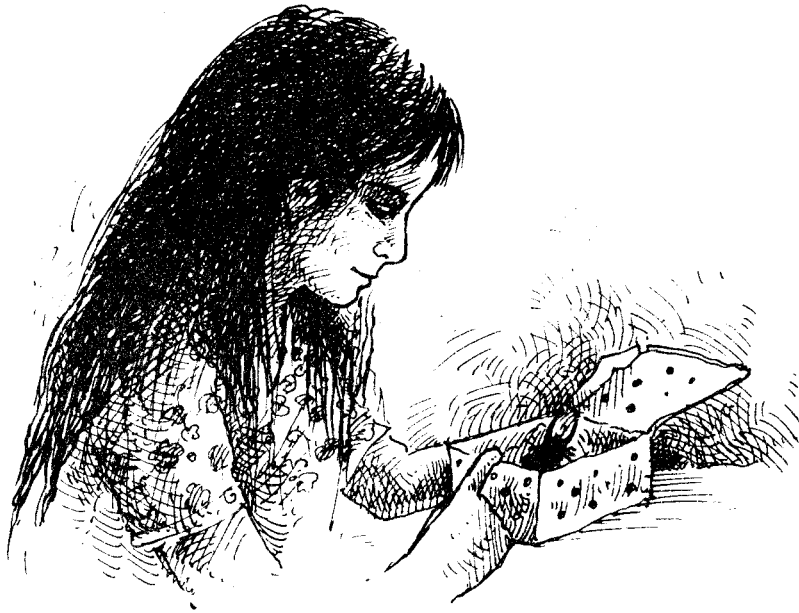
Suraj heard the rumble as the train passed over a small bridge. It was too dark to see the hut near the cutting, but he knew they must be approaching the tunnel. He strained his eyes looking out into the night; and then, just as the engine let out a shrill whistle, Suraj saw the lamp.

He couldn't see Sunder Singh, but he saw the lamp, and he knew that his friend was out there.

The train went into the tunnel and out again; it left the jungle behind and thundered across the endless plains.

THE TUNNEL

Suraj stared out at the darkness, thinking of the lonely cutting in the forest and the watchman with the lamp who would always remain a firefly for those travelling thousands as he lit up the darkness for steam-engines and leopards.



2 *The Big Race*

Dawn crept quietly over the sleeping town. Only a cock was aware of it, and crowed. Koki heard a soft tapping on the window-pane, and immediately sat up in bed. She was ten years old. Her hair fell about her shoulders in a disorderly fashion and her dark eyes were slightly ringed, but she was wide awake and listening. The tapping was repeated.

Koki got out of bed and tiptoed across to the window and unlatched it. Ranji was standing outside, looking somewhat disgruntled.

"Come on," he said. "It's nearly time."

Koki put a finger to her lips, for she did not want her parents and grandmother to wake up.

"You go and call Bhim," she whispered. "I'll meet

you on the maidaan."

Ranji hurried off in the direction of Bhim's house, and Koki turned from the window and went to the dressing-table. She combed her hair carelessly and tied it roughly in a ribbon. She was excited and in a hurry, and had slept in her dress, which was very crushed. Now she was ready to leave.

Very quietly, she pulled open a dressing-table drawer, and brought out a cardboard box in which were punctured little holes. She opened the lid of the box to see if Rajkumari was all right.

Rajkumari, a dumpy rhino beetle, was asleep on the core of an apple. Koki did not disturb her. She closed the box and, barefoot, crept out of the house through the back door.

As soon as she was outside, Koki broke into a run. She did not stop running until she reached the maidaan.

On the maidaan, the slanting rays of the early morning sun were just beginning to make emeralds of the dew-drops. Later in the day the grass would dry and be prickly to the feet, but now it was cool and soft. A group of boys had gathered at one corner of the maidaan, talking excitedly, and among them were Ranji and Bhim, a lanky, bespectacled boy of fourteen. Koki was the only girl among them.

Bhim's beetle was the favourite for the race. It was a large bamboo beetle, with a slim body and long, slender legs, rather like its master's. It was called 2001. Ranji's beetle was a Stone Carrier with what looked like a very long pair of whiskers. It was appropriately named Moocha (Moustaches). Koki's beetle was not half as big as the other two. Though she did not know how to tell its

sex, she was sure it was a female and had called it Rajkumari – Princess.

There were only three entries. Betting wasn't strictly allowed, but the boys made a few quiet bets among themselves. The prize was a giant insect (there was some disagreement as to whether it was a beetle or an outsize cockroach), which was meant to enable the winner to breed racing beetles on a larger scale.

There was some confusion when Ranji's Moocha escaped from his box and took a preliminary canter over the grass; but he was soon caught and returned to his enclosure. Moocha appeared to be in good form; in fact, he would be tough competition for Bhim's 2001.

The course was about two metres long, the tracks fifteen centimetres wide. The tracks were fenced with strips of cardboard so that the contestants did not get in each other's way or leave the course altogether. They were held at the starting-post by another piece of cardboard, which would be placed behind them as soon as the race began – just to make sure that no one backed out.

A little Sikh boy in a yellow pyjama-suit was acting as starter, and he kept blowing his whistle for order and attention. When the onlookers saw that the race was about to begin, they fell silent. The little Sikh boy then announced the rules of the race: the contestants were not to be touched during the race, or blown at from behind, or enticed forward with bits of food. They could, however, be cheered on as loudly as anyone wished.

Moocha and 2001 were already at the starting-post, but Koki was giving Rajkumari a few words of advice.

Rajkumari seemed reluctant to leave her apple-core and needed to be taken forcibly to the starting-post.

There was further delay when Moocha and 2001 got their horns and whiskers entangled. They had to be separated and calmed down before being placed in their respective tracks. The race was about to start.

Koki knelt on the grass, very quiet and serious, looking from Rajkumari to the finishing-line and back again. Ranji was biting his finger-nails. Bhim's glasses had clouded over, and he had to keep taking them off and wiping them on his shirt. There was a hush amongst the dozen or so spectators.

"Pee-ee-eeep!" The little Sikh boy blew his whistle.

They were off!

Or rather, Moocha and 2001 were off. Rajkumari was still at the starting-post, wondering what had happened to her apple-core.

Everyone was cheering madly, and Ranji was jumping up and down, and Bhim's glasses had been knocked off. Moocha was going at a spanking rate. 2001 wasn't taking a great deal of interest in the proceedings, but he *was* moving, and anything could happen in a race like this.

Koki was on the verge of tears. All the coaching she had given Rajkumari seemed to be of no avail. Her beetle was still looking bewildered and hurt.

"Stop sulking," said Koki. "I won't keep you if you don't try."

Then Moocha stopped suddenly, less than a metre from the finishing-line. He seemed to be having trouble with his whiskers, and kept twitching them this way and that. 2001 was catching up slowly but surely, and both

Ranji and Bhim were shouting themselves hoarse. Nobody paid any attention to Rajkumari, who was considered to be out of the race; but Koki was using all her will-power to get her racer going.

As 2001 approached Moocha, he seemed to sense his rival's trouble, and stopped to find out what was the matter. They could not see each other over the cardboard fence, but otherwise appeared to be communicating very well. Ranji and Bhim were becoming quite frantic in their efforts to rally their faltering steeds, and the cheering on all sides was deafening.

Rajkumari, goaded with rage and frustration at having been deprived of her apple-core, now took it into her head to make a bid for liberty and new pastures, and rushed forward in great style.

Koki shouted with joy, but the others did not notice the new challenge until Rajkumari had drawn level with her conferring rivals. There was a gasp from the crowd as Rajkumari strode across the finishing-line in record time.

Everyone cheered the gallant outsider. Ranji and Bhim very sportingly shook Koki by the hand, congratulating her on Rajkumari's victory. The little Sikh boy in the yellow pyjama-suit blew his whistle for silence and presented Koki with her prize.

Koki gazed in rapture at the new beetle – or was it a cockroach? She stroked its back with her thumb. The insect didn't seem to mind. Then, lest Rajkumari should feel jealous, Koki closed the prize-box and, picking up her victorious beetle, returned her to the apple-core.

The crowd began to break up. Ranji decided that he

would trim Moocha's whiskers before the next race, and Bhim thought 2001 was in need of a special diet.

"Just wait till next Sunday," said Ranji. "Then watch my Moocha leave the rest of you standing!"

Bhim said nothing. He looked very thoughtful. There were some new training methods which he was going to try out for next time.

Koki walked home, a cardboard box under each arm. Her thoughts were busy with the future. She would breed beetles (or would they be cockroaches?) until she had a stable of about twenty. Her racers would win every event, both here and in the next town. They might make her famous. Beetle-racing would become a national sport!

Meanwhile, she was happy, and Rajkumari was happy on the apple-core, and the new insect was just being an insect and did not know and did not care about anything except how to get out of that wretched box.



3 *Ranji's Wonderful Bat*

"How's that!" shouted the wicket-keeper, holding the ball up in his gloves.

"How's that!" echoed the slip-fielders.

"How?" growled the fast bowler, glaring at the umpire.

"Out!" said the umpire.

And Suraj, the captain of the school team, was walking slowly back to the 'pavilion' – which was really a tool-shed at the end of the field.

The score stood at 53 for 4 wickets. Another sixty runs had to be made for victory, and only one good batsman remained. All the rest were bowlers who couldn't be expected to make many runs.

It was Ranji's turn to bat.

He was the youngest member of the team, only eleven, but sturdy and full of pluck. As he walked briskly to the wicket, his unruly black hair was blown about by a cool breeze that came down from the hills.

Ranji had a good eye and strong wrists, and had made lots of runs in some of the minor matches. But in the last two inter-school games his scores had been poor, the highest being 12 runs. Now he was determined to make enough runs to take his side to victory.

Ranji took his guard and prepared to face the bowler. The fielders moved closer, in anticipation of another catch. The tall fast bowler scowled and began his long run. His arm whirled over, and the hard shiny red ball came hurtling towards Ranji.

Ranji was going to lunge forward and play the ball back to the bowler, but at the last moment he changed his mind and stepped back, intending to push the ball through the ring of fielders on his right or 'off' side. The ball swung in the air, shot off the grass and came through sharply to strike Ranji on his pads.

"How's that!" screamed the bowler, hopping about like a kangaroo.

"How!" shouted the wicket-keeper.

"How?" asked all the fielders.

The umpire slowly raised a finger.

"Out," he said.

And it was Ranji's turn to walk back to the tool-shed.

The match was won by the visiting team.

"Never mind," said Suraj, patting Ranji on the back. "You'll do better next time. You're out of form just now, that's all."

But their cricket coach was sterner.

"You'll have to make more runs in the next game," he told Ranji, "or you'll lose your place in the side!"

Avoiding the other players, Ranji walked slowly homewards, his head down, his hands in his pockets. He was very upset. He had been trying so hard and practising so regularly, but when an important game came along he failed to make a big score. It seemed that there was nothing he could do about it. But he loved playing cricket, and he couldn't bear the thought of being out of the school team.

On his way home he had to pass the clock tower where he often stopped at Mr Kumar's Sports Shop, to chat with the owner or look at all the things on the shelves: footballs, cricket balls, badminton rackets, hockey sticks, balls of various shapes and sizes – it was a wonderland where Ranji usually liked to linger.

But this was one day when he didn't feel like stopping. He looked the other way and was about to cross the road when Mr Kumar's voice stopped him.

"Hello, Ranji! Off in a hurry today? And why are you looking so sad?"

So Ranji had to stop and say "namaste". He couldn't ignore Mr Kumar, who had been so kind and helpful, always giving him advice on how to play different kinds of bowling. Mr Kumar had been a state player once, and had scored a century in a match against Tanzania. Now he was too old for first-class cricket, but he liked encouraging young players and he thought Ranji would make a good cricketer.

"What's the trouble?" he asked, as Ranji stepped into the shop. "Lost the game today?"

Ranji felt better as soon as he was inside the shop.

Because Mr Kumar was so friendly, the sports goods also seemed friendly. The bats and balls and shuttle-cocks all seemed to want to be helpful.

"We lost the match," said Ranji.

"Never mind," said Mr Kumar. "Where would we be without losers? There wouldn't be any games without them – no cricket or football or hockey or tennis! No carom or marbles. No sports shop for me! Anyway, how many runs did you make?"

"None. I made a big round egg."

Mr Kumar rested his hand on Ranji's shoulder. "Never mind. All good players have a bad day now and then."

"But I haven't made a good score in my last three matches," said Ranji. "I'll be dropped from the team if I don't do something in the next game."

"Well, we can't have that happening," mused Mr Kumar. "Something will have to be done about it."

"I'm just unlucky," said Ranji.

"Maybe, maybe. . . But in that case, it's time your luck changed."

"It's too late now," said Ranji.

"Nonsense. It's never too late. Now, you just come with me to the back of my shop and I'll see if I can do something about your luck."

Puzzled, Ranji followed Mr Kumar through the curtained partition at the back of the shop. He found himself in a badly lit room stacked to the ceiling with all kinds of old and secondhand sporting goods – torn football bladders, broken bats, rackets without strings, broken darts and tattered badminton nets.

Mr Kumar began examining a number of old cricket

bats, and after a few minutes he said "Ah!" and picked up one of the bats and held it out to Ranji.

"This is it!" he said. "This is the luckiest of all my old bats. This is the bat I made a century with!" And he gave it a twirl and started hitting an imaginary ball to all corners of the room.

"Of course it's an old bat, but it hasn't lost any of its magic," said Mr Kumar, pausing in his stroke-making to recover his breath. He held it out to Ranji. "Here, take it! I'll lend it to you for the rest of the cricket season. You won't fail with it."

Ranji took the bat and gazed at it with awe and delight.

"Is it really the bat you made a century with?" he asked.

"It is," said Mr Kumar. "And it may get you a hundred runs too!"

Ranji spent a nervous week waiting for Saturday's match. His school team would be playing a strong side from another town. There was a lot of class work that week, so Ranji did not get much time to practise with the other boys. As he had no brothers or sisters, he asked Koki, the girl next door, to bowl to him in the garden. Koki bowled quite well, but Ranji liked to hit the ball hard – "just to get used to the bat," he told her – and she soon got tired of chasing the ball all over the garden.

At last Saturday arrived, bright and sunny and just right for cricket.

Suraj won the toss for the school and took first batting.

The opening batsmen put on thirty runs without being separated. The visiting fast bowlers couldn't do much. The spin bowlers came on, and immediately there was a change in the game. Two wickets fell in one over, and the score was 33 for 2. Suraj made a few quick runs, then he too was out to one of the spinners, caught behind the wicket. The next batsman was clean bowled . . . 46 for 4 . . . and it was Ranji's turn to bat.

He walked slowly to the wicket. The fielders crowded round him. He took guard and prepared for the first ball.

The bowler took a short run and then the ball was twirling towards Ranji, looking as though it would spin away from his bat as he leant forward into his stroke.

And then a thrill ran through Ranji's arm as he felt the ball meet the springy willow of the bat.

Crack!

The ball, hit firmly with the middle of Ranji's bat, streaked past the helpless bowler and sped towards the boundary. Four runs!

The bowler was annoyed, with the result that his next ball was a loose full-toss. Ranji swung it to the on-side boundary for another four.

And that was only the beginning. Now Ranji began to play all the strokes he knew: late cuts and square cuts, straight drives, on-drives and off-drives. The rival captain tried all his bowlers, fast and spin, but none of them could remove Ranji, who sent the fielders scampering all over the field.

At the lunch break he had scored 40. And twenty minutes after lunch, when Suraj closed the innings, Ranji was not out with 58.

The rival team was bowled out for a poor score, and Ranji's school won the match.

On his way home Ranji stopped at Mr Kumar's shop to give him the good news.

"We won!" he said. "And I made 58 – my highest score so far. It really is a lucky bat!"

"I told you so," said Mr Kumar, giving Ranji a warm handshake. "There'll be bigger scores yet."

Ranji went home in high spirits. He was so pleased that he stopped at the Jumna Sweet Shop and bought two luddos for Koki. She liked cricket but she liked luddos even more.

Mr Kumar was right. It was only the beginning of Ranji's success with the bat. In the next game he scored 40, and was out when he grew careless and allowed himself to be stumped by the wicket-keeper. The game that followed was a two-day match, and Ranji, who was now batting at No. 3, made 45 runs. He hit a number of boundaries before being caught. In the second innings, when the school team needed only 60 runs for victory, Ranji was batting with 25 when the winning runs were hit.

Everyone was pleased with him – his coach, his captain, Suraj and Mr Kumar. . . but no one knew about the lucky bat. That was a secret between Ranji and Mr Kumar.

One evening, during an informal game on the maidaan, Ranji's friend Bhim slipped while running after the ball, and cut his hand on a sharp stone. Ranji took him to a doctor near the clock tower, where the wound was washed and bandaged. As it was getting late,

he decided to go straight home. Usually he walked, but that evening he caught a bus near the clock tower.

When he got home, his mother brought him a cup of tea and while he was drinking it, Koki walked in. The first thing she said was, "Ranji, where's your bat?"

"Oh, I must have left it on the maidaan when Bhim got hurt," said Ranji, starting up and spilling his tea. "I'd better go and get it now, or it will disappear."

"You can fetch it tomorrow," said his mother. "It's getting dark."

"I'll take a torch," said Ranji.

He was worried about the bat. Without it, his luck might desert him. He hadn't the patience to wait for a bus, and ran all the way to the maidaan.

The maidaan was deserted and there was no sign of the bat. And then Ranji remembered that he'd had it with him on the bus, after saying goodbye to Bhim at the clock tower. He must have left it on the bus!

Well, he'd never find it now. The bat was lost for ever. And on Saturday Ranji's school would be playing their last and most important match of the cricket season against a visiting team from Delhi.

Next day he was at Mr Kumar's shop, looking very sorry for himself.

"What's the matter?" asked Mr Kumar.

"I've lost the bat," said Ranji. "Your lucky bat. The one I made all those runs with! I left it on the bus. And the day after tomorrow we are playing the Delhi school, and I'll be out for a duck, and we'll lose our chance of being the school champions."

Mr Kumar looked a little anxious at first; then he

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smiled and said, "You can still make all the runs you want."

"But I don't have the bat any more," said Ranji.

"Any bat will do," said Mr Kumar.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it's the batsman and not the bat that matters. Shall I tell you something? That old bat I gave you was no different from any other bat I've used. True, I made lots of runs with it, but I made runs with other bats too. I never depended on a special bat for my runs. A bat has magic only when the batsman has magic! What you needed was *confidence*, not a bat. And by believing in the bat, you got your confidence back!"

"What's confidence?" asked Ranji. It was a new word for him.

"Con – fi – dence," said Mr Kumar slowly. "Confidence is knowing you are good."

"And I can be good without the bat?"

"Of course. You have always been good. You are good now. You will be good the day after tomorrow. Remember that. If you remember it, you'll make the runs."

On Saturday Ranji walked to the wicket with a bat borrowed from Bhim.

The school team had lost its first wicket with only 2 runs on the board. Ranji went in at this stage. The Delhi school's opening bowler was sending down some really fast ones. Ranji faced up to him.

The first ball was very fast but it wasn't on a good length. Quick on his feet, Ranji stepped back and pulled it hard to the on-boundary. The ball soared over the heads of the fielders and landed with a crash in a crate full of cold-drink bottles.

RANJI'S WONDERFUL BAT

A six! Everyone stood up and cheered.

And it was only the beginning of Ranji's wonderful innings.

The match ended in a draw, but Ranji's 75 was the talk of the school.

On his way home he bought a dozen luddoos. Six for Koki – and six for Mr Kumar.



4 *The Long Day*

Suraj was awakened by the sound of his mother busying herself in the kitchen. He lay in bed, looking through the open window at the sky getting lighter and the dawn pushing its way into the room. He knew there was something important about this new day, but for some time he couldn't remember what it was. Then, as the room cleared, his mind cleared. His school report would be arriving in the post.

Suraj knew he had failed. The class teacher had told him so. But his mother would only know of it when she read the report, and Suraj did not want to be in the house when she received it. He was sure it would be arriving today. So he had told his mother that he would be having his midday meal with his friend Somi – Somi,

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who wasn't even in town at the moment – and would be home only for the evening meal. By that time, he hoped, his mother would have recovered from the shock. He was glad his father was away on tour.

He slipped out of bed and went to the kitchen. His mother was surprised to see him up so early.

"I'm going for a walk, Ma," he said, "and then I'll go on to Somi's house."

"Well, have your bath first and put something in your stomach."

Suraj went to the tap in the courtyard and took a quick bath. He put on a clean shirt and shorts. Carelessly he brushed his thick, curly hair, knowing he couldn't bring much order to its wildness. Then he gulped down a glass of milk and hurried out of the house. The postman wouldn't arrive for a couple of hours, but Suraj felt that the earlier his start the better. His mother was surprised and pleased to see him up and about so early.

Suraj was out on the maidaan and still the sun had not risen. The maidaan was an open area of grass, about a hundred square metres, and from the middle of it could be seen the mountains, range upon range of them, stepping into the sky. A game of football was in progress, and one of the players called out to Suraj to join them. Suraj said he wouldn't play for more than ten minutes, because he had some business to attend to; he kicked off his chappals and ran barefoot after the ball. Everyone was playing barefoot. It was an informal game, and the players were of all ages and sizes, from bearded Sikhs to small boys of six or seven. Suraj ran all over the place without actually getting in touch with the

ball – he wasn't much good at football – and finally got into a scramble before the goal, fell and scratched his knee. He retired from the game even sooner than he had intended.

The scratch wasn't bad but there was some blood on his knee. He wiped it clean with his handkerchief and limped off the maidaan. He went in the direction of the railway station, but not through the bazaar. He went by way of the canal, which came from the foot of the nearest mountain, flowed through the town and down to the river. Beside the canal were the washerwomen, scrubbing and beating out clothes on the stone banks.

The canal was only a metre wide but, due to recent rain, the current was swift and noisy. Suraj stood on the bank, watching the rush of water. There was an inlet at one place, and here some children were bathing, and some were rushing up and down the bank, wearing nothing at all, shouting to each other in high spirits. Suraj felt like taking a dip too, but he did not know any of the children here; most of them were from very poor families. Hands in pockets, he walked along the canal banks.

The sun had risen and was pouring through the branches of the trees that lined the road. The leaves made shadowy patterns on the ground. Suraj tried hard not to think of his school report, but he knew that at any moment now the postman would be handing over a long brown envelope to his mother. He tried to imagine his mother's expression when she read the report; but the more he tried to picture her face, the more certain he was that, on knowing his result, she would show no expression at all. And having no expression on her face was much worse than having one.

Suraj heard the whistle of a train, and knew he was not far from the station. He cut through a field, climbed a hillock and ran down the slope until he was near the railway tracks. Here came the train, screeching and puffing: in the distance, a big black beetle, and then, when the carriages swung into sight, a centipede . . .

Suraj stood a good twenty metres away from the lines, on the slope of the hill. As the train passed, he pulled the handkerchief off his knee and began to wave it furiously. There was something about passing trains that filled him with awe and excitement. All those passengers, with mysterious lives and mysterious destinations, were people he wanted to know, people whose mysteries he wanted to unfold. He had been in a train recently, when his parents had taken him to bathe in the sacred river, Ganga, at Hardwar. He wished he could be in a train now; or, better still, be an engine-driver, with no more books and teachers and school reports. He did not know of any thirteen-year-old engine-drivers, but he saw himself driving the engine, shouting orders to the stoker; it made him feel powerful to be in control of a mighty steam-engine.

Someone – another boy – returned his wave, and the two waved at each other for a few seconds, and then the train had passed, its smoke spiralling backwards.

Suraj felt a little lonely now. Somehow, the passing of the train left him with a feeling of being alone in a wide empty world. He was feeling hungry too. He went back to the field where he had seen some lichi trees, climbed into one of them and began plucking and peeling and eating the juicy red-skinned fruit. No one seemed to own the lichi trees because, although a dog appeared

below and began barking, no one else appeared. Suraj kept spitting lichi seeds at the dog, and the dog kept barking at him. Eventually the dog lost interest and slunk off.

Suraj began to feel drowsy in the afternoon heat. The lichi trees offered a lot of shade below, so he came down from the tree and sat on the grass, his back resting against the tree-trunk. A mynah-bird came hopping up to his feet and looked at him curiously, its head to one side.

Insects kept buzzing around Suraj. He swiped at them once or twice, but then couldn't make the effort to keep swiping. He opened his shirt buttons. The air was very hot, very still; the only sound was the faint buzzing of the insects. His head fell forward on his chest.

He opened his eyes to find himself being shaken, and looked up into the round, cheerful face of his friend Ranji.

"What are you doing, sleeping here?" asked Ranji, who was a couple of years younger than Suraj. "Have you run away from home?"

"Not yet," said Suraj. "And what are *you* doing here?"

"Came for lichis."

"So did I."

They sat together for a while and talked and ate lichis. Then Ranji suggested that they visit the bazaar to eat fried pakoras.

"I haven't any money," said Suraj.

"That doesn't matter," said Ranji, who always seemed to be in funds. "I have two rupees."

So they walked to the bazaar. They crossed the field,

walked back past the canal, skirted the maidaan, came to the clock tower and entered the bazaar.

The evening crowd had just begun to fill the road, and there was a lot of bustle and noise: the street-vendors called their wares in high, strident voices; children shouted and women bargained. There was a medley of smells and aromas coming from the little restaurants and sweet shops, and a medley of colour in the bangle and kite shops. Suraj and Ranji ate their pakoras, felt thirsty, and gazed at the rows and rows of coloured bottles at the cold-drinks shop, where at least ten varieties of sweet, sticky, fizzy drinks were available. But they had already finished the two rupees, so there was nothing for them to do but quench their thirst at the municipal tap.

Afterwards they wandered down the crowded street, examining the shop-fronts, commenting on the passers-by, and every now and then greeting some friend or acquaintance. Darkness came on suddenly, and then the bazaar was lit up, the big shops with bright electric and neon lights, the street-vendors with oil-lamps. The bazaar at night was even more exciting than during the day.

They traversed the bazaar from end to end, and when they were at the clock tower again, Ranji said he had to go home, and left Suraj. It was nearing Suraj's dinner-time and so, unwillingly, he too turned homewards. He did not want it to appear that he was deliberately staying out late because of the school report.

The lights were on in the front room when he got home. He waited outside, secure in the darkness of the

verandah, watching the lighted room. His mother would be waiting for him, she would probably have the report in her hand or on the kitchen shelf, and she would have lots and lots of questions to ask him.

All the cares of the world seemed to descend on Suraj as he crept into the house.

"You're late," said his mother. "Come and have your food."

Suraj said nothing, but removed his shoes outside the kitchen and sat down cross-legged on the kitchen floor, which was where he took his meals. He was tired and hungry. He no longer cared about anything.

"One of your class-fellows dropped in," said his mother. "He said your reports were sent out today. They'll arrive tomorrow."

Tomorrow! Suraj felt a great surge of relief.

But then, just as suddenly, his spirits fell again.

Tomorrow . . . a further postponement of the dread moment, another night and another morning . . . something would have to be done about it!

"Ma," he said abruptly. "Somi has asked me to his house again tomorrow."

"I don't know how his mother puts up with you so often," said Suraj's mother.

Suraj lay awake in bed, planning the morrow's activities: a game of cricket or football on the maidaan; perhaps a dip in the canal; a half-hour watching the trains thunder past; and in the evening an hour in the bazaar, among the kites and balloons and rose-coloured fizzy drinks and round dripping syrupy sweets . . . Perhaps, in the morning, he could persuade his mother

to give him two or three rupees . . . It would be his last rupees for quite some time.



5 *When the Guavas are Ripe*

Guava trees are easy to climb. And guavas are good to eat. So it's little wonder that an orchard of guava trees is a popular place with boys and girls.

Just across the road from Ranji's house, on the other side of a low wall, was a large guava orchard. The monsoon rains were almost over. It was a warm humid day in September, and the guavas were ripening, turning from green to gold; no longer hard, but growing soft and sweet and juicy.

The schools were closed because of a religious festival. Ranji's father was at work in his office. Ranji's mother was enjoying an afternoon siesta on a cot in the backyard. His grandmother was busy teaching her pet parrot to recite a prayer.

"I feel like getting into those guava trees," said Ranji to himself. "It's months since I climbed a tree."

He was soon across the road and over the wall and into the trees. He chose a tree that grew in the middle of the orchard, where it was unlikely that he would be disturbed; then he climbed swiftly into its branches. A cluster of guavas swung just above him. He reached up for one of them, but to his surprise he found himself clutching a small bare foot which had suddenly been thrust through the foliage.

Having caught the foot, Ranji did not let go. Instead he pulled hard on it. There was a squeal and someone came toppling down on him. Ranji found himself clutching at arms and legs. Together they crashed through a couple of branches and landed with a thud on the soft ground beneath the tree.

Ranji and the intruder struggled fiercely. They rolled about on the grass. Ranji tried a judo hold – without any success. Then he saw that his opponent was a girl. It was his friend and neighbour, Koki.

"It's you!" he gasped.

"It's me," said Koki. "And what are *you* doing here?"

"Get your knee out of my stomach and I'll tell you."

When he had recovered his breath, he said, "I just felt like climbing a tree."

"So did I."

He stared at her. There was guava juice at the corners of her mouth and on her chin.

"Are the guavas good?" he asked.

"Quite sweet, in this tree," said Koki. "You find another tree for yourself, Ranji. There must be thirty or

forty trees to choose from."

"And all going to waste," said Ranji. "Look, some of the guavas have been spoilt by the birds."

"Nobody wants them, it seems."

Koki climbed back into her tree, and Ranji obligingly walked a little further and climbed another tree. After a few polite exchanges they fell silent, their attention given over entirely to the eating of guavas.

"I've eaten five," said Koki after some time.

"You'd better stop."

"You're only saying that because you've just started."

"Well, three's enough for me."

"I'm getting a tummy-ache, I think."

"I warned you. Come on, I'll take you home. We can come back tomorrow. There are still lots of guavas left. Hundreds!"

"I don't think I want to eat any more," said Koki.

She felt better the next day – so well, in fact, that Ranji found her leaning on the gate, waiting for him to join her. She was accompanied by her small brother, Teju, who was only six and very mischievous.

"How are you feeling today?" asked Ranji.

"Hungry," said Koki.

"Why did you bring your brother?"

"He wants to start climbing trees."

Soon they were in the orchard. Ranji and Koki helped Teju into the branches of one of the smaller trees and then made for other trees, disturbing a party of parrots who flew in circles round the orchard, screaming their protests.

Two boys and a girl talking to each other from three different trees can make quite a lot of noise, and it wasn't only the birds who were disturbed. Though they did not know it, the orchard belonged to a wealthy property-dealer and he employed a watchman, whose duty it was to keep away birds, children, monkeys, flying-foxes and other fruit-eating pests. But on a hot sultry afternoon Gopal the watchman could not resist taking a nap. He was stretched out under a shady jack-fruit tree, snoring so loudly that the flies who had been buzzing round him felt that a storm was brewing and kept their distance.

He woke to the sound of voices raised high in glee. Sitting up, he brushed a ladybird from his long moustache, then seized his lathi, a long stout stick usually carried by watchmen.

"Who's there?" he shouted, struggling to his feet.

There was a sudden silence in the trees.

"Who's there?" he called again.

No answer.

"I must have been dreaming," he muttered, and was preparing to lie down and take another nap when Teju, who had been watching him, burst into laughter.

"Ho!" shouted the watchman, coming to life again. "Thieves! I'll settle you!" And he began striding towards the centre of the orchard, boasting all the time of his physical prowess. "I'm not afraid of thieves, bandits, or wild beasts! I'll have you know that I was once the wrestling champion of the entire district of Dehra. Come on out and fight me if you dare!"

"Run!" hissed Koki, scrambling down from her tree.

"Run!" shouted Ranji, as though it were a cricket match.

Teju was so startled by the sudden activity that he tumbled out of his tree and began crying, and Ranji and Koki had to go to his aid.

The sight of an enormous ex-wrestler bearing down on them was enough to make Teju stop crying and get to his feet. Then all three were fleeing across the grove, the watchman a little way behind them, waving his lathi and shouting at the top of his voice. Although he was an ex-wrestler (or perhaps because of it) he could not run very fast, and was still huffing and puffing some twenty metres behind them when they climbed up and over the wall. He could not climb walls either.

They ran off in different directions before returning home.

Next day, Ranji met Koki and Teju at the far end of the road.

"Is he there?" asked Koki.

"I haven't seen him. But he must be around somewhere."

"Maybe he's gone for his lunch. We'll just walk past and take a quick look."

The three of them strolled casually down the road. Koki said the gardens were looking very pretty. Teju gazed admiringly at a boy flying a kite from a roof-top. Ranji kept one eye on the road and one eye on the orchard wall. A squirrel ran along the top of the wall; the parrots were back in the guava trees.

They moved closer to the wall. Ranji leaned casually against it and Koki began to pick little daisies growing at the edge of the road. Teju, unable to hide his curiosity, pulled himself up on the wall and looked over. At the

same time, Gopal the watchman, who had been hiding behind the wall waiting for them, stood up slowly and glared fiercely at Teju.

Teju gulped, but he did not flinch. He was looking straight into the watchman's red angry eyes.

"And what can I do for you?" growled Gopal.

"I was just looking," said Teju.

"At what?"

"At the view."

Gopal was a little baffled. They looked just like the children he'd chased away yesterday, but he couldn't be sure. They didn't *look* guilty. But did children ever look guilty?

"There's a better view from the other side of the road," he said gruffly. "Now be off!"

"What lovely guavas," said Koki, smiling sweetly. There weren't many people who could resist that smile!

"True," said Ranji, with the air of one who was an expert on guavas and all things good to eat. "They are just the right size and colour. I don't think I've seen better. But they'll be spoilt by the birds if you don't gather them soon."

"It's none of your business," said the watchman.

"Just look at his muscles," said Teju, trying a different approach. "He's really strong!"

Gopal looked pleased for once. He was proud of his former prowess, even though he was now rather flabby around the waist.

"You look like a wrestler," said Ranji.

"I *am* a wrestler," said Gopal.

"I told you so," said Koki. "What else could he be?"

"I'm a retired wrestler," said Gopal.

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"You don't look retired," said Teju, fast learning that flattery can get you almost anywhere.

Gopal swelled with pride; such admiration hadn't come his way for a long time. To Koki he looked like a bull-frog swelling up, but she thought it better not to say so.

"Do you want to see my muscles?" he asked.

"Yes, yes!" they cried. "Do show us!"

Gopal peeled off his shirt and thumped his chest. It sounded like a drum. They were really impressed. Then he bent his elbow and his biceps stood up like cricket balls.

"You can touch them," he said generously.

Teju poked a finger into Gopal's biceps.

"Mister Universe!" he exclaimed.

Gopal glowed all over. He liked these children. How intelligent they were! Not everyone had the sense to appreciate his strength, his manliness, his magnificent physique!

"Climb over the wall and join me," he said. "Come sit on the grass and I'll tell you about the time when I was a wrestling champion."

Over the wall they came, and sat politely on the grass. Gopal told them about some of his exploits; how he had vanquished a world-famous wrestler in five seconds flat, and how he had saved a carload of travellers from drowning by single-handedly dragging their car out of a river. They listened patiently. Then Teju mentioned that he was feeling hungry.

"Hungry?" said Gopal. "Why didn't you tell me before? I'll bring you some guavas, that's all there is to eat here. I know which tree has the best ones. And

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they're all going to rot if no one eats them – no one's buying the crop this year, the owner's price is too high!"

Gopal hurried off and soon returned with a basket full of guavas.

"Help yourselves," he said. "But don't eat too many, you'll get sick."

So they munched guavas and listened to Gopal tell them about the time he was waylaid by three bandits and how he threw them all into the village pond.

"Will you come again tomorrow?" asked Gopal eagerly, when the guavas were finished and the children got up to leave. "Come tomorrow and I'll tell you another story."

"We'll come tomorrow," said Teju, looking at all the guava trees still laden with fruit.

Somehow it seemed very important to Gopal that they should come again. It was lonely in the orchard. Koki sensed this, and said, "We like your stories."

"They are good stories," said Ranji, even if they were not entirely true, he thought . . .

They climbed over the wall and waved goodbye to Gopal.

They came again the next day.

And even when the guava season was over and Gopal had nothing to offer them but his stories, they went to see him because by that time they had grown to like him.



6 The King and the Tree-Goddess

This is one of the stories Koki's grandmother told the children on a wet monsoon evening, when it was impossible to play outside. Grandmother loved trees, and this was one of her favourite tree stories.

There was once a king living in the Himalayan foothills, who longed to build himself a palace more beautiful than any he had seen in that part of the world. He could not make it richer, taller or stronger than any other without going to a great deal of expense and trouble. So he decided to build something different: the entire palace was to be supported by one column only, and that column was to be made from the tallest tree in the kingdom.

In the Himalayas there are many tall trees – spruce and pine, oak and deodar. And the tallest and the strongest are the deodars, whose very name, *Deo-Dar*, means Tree of God.

The King sent for his Prime Minister and said, “Send men to my forests far and near, and tell them to cut down and bring to this city without delay the largest deodar they can find.”

“But the deodar is a sacred tree,” protested his daughter. “It is used only for building temples.”

“All the more reason for me to have one,” said the King. “My palace shall be as magnificent as any temple!”

The Prime Minister sent out thirty men but they soon returned, saying that though there were many great deodars in the kingdom, they could never carry or drag them over so much difficult country as lay between the forests and the city.

When the King heard this, he called his son and said, “Take your horsemen, and with the help of your horses, bring me one of these trees.”

The prince rode out with his horsemen but returned after a few days, saying, “No horses could move such a tree an inch. We have tried oxen too, but without any success.”

“Well, then, try elephants,” said the King.

Elephants were brought from the plains, but the hills were too steep for them, and the paths too narrow; they had to return to the valley.

“Very well,” said the King angrily. “In one of my own parks you must find me a tree just as big as any in the forests. Bring it to me within seven days.”

After much searching, the King's men found a splendid deodar tree growing not far from the city. It was worshipped by the people of many villages round about, because within it lived a Goddess, and it was she who gave to the tree its great strength, size and beauty.

When the Prime Minister and his men had decided that the column for the King's palace must be made from this lofty deodar tree, they came with garlands, lamps and music to pay their respects to the Goddess inside, and to warn her that she must leave her abode. Within seven days it had to be cut to the ground.

They lit their lamps and placed them in a circle round the tree. They hung their garlands upon the branches and tied nosegays among the leaves. Then, joining hands, some danced, and others sang:

With cruel axe we've come
To fell your age-long home;
Forgive us, great Tree-Goddess –
We dance before your throne!
To please the King must we
Cut down your loveliest tree.

The Tree-Goddess heard, and understood what was about to happen. She remained quiet as a resting breeze for a few moments, and then all her leaves began to whisper and her topmost branches bowed. The men went away satisfied that she had heard and understood.

That night, when the King was asleep, a glorious figure draped in shining green foliage appeared to him, and spoke in a voice that was like the rustle of autumn leaves:

"I am the Goddess of the Deodar tree, great King. Your men have told me that you intend to cut me down. I have come to beg you to change your mind."

"No, my mind is made up," answered the King in his dream. "Yours is the only tree in all my parks strong enough to support by itself a palace, and therefore I must have it."

"But consider, oh King! For hundreds of years I have been worshipped by the people of all the villages in your kingdom, and nothing but good has gone out from me to them. The birds nest in me. I send a most lovely shade upon the grass. Men rest against my trunk and wild creatures rub themselves against me. The earth blesses me, and sends up new plants and herbs under my protective arms. I bind the earth with my strong roots. Children play at my feet, and women returning from the fields seek refuge in my coolness."

"All true enough, good Tree-Goddess," said the King, "but all the same I cannot spare you. My mind is made up, my will cannot be shaken."

The Tree-Goddess sank her head upon her breast and spoke in tones of great sorrow.

"Then, mighty King, grant me one last request. Let me be felled in three parts. First my head, with its crown of waving greenery. Next my middle, with its hundred strong arms and hands. And last my base, which bears the heaviest and knottiest of my limbs upon it."

"This is a strange request," said the King. "I have never before heard of someone who wished to suffer the death stroke *thrice*! Why not suffer it once, and have done with it?"

"The reason is plain," said the Tree-Goddess.

“Dozens of young deodar trees have sprung from me, and have grown up around me. Should you fell me with one mighty stroke, my weight would certainly crush all my children to death. But if I suffer the stroke three times, and fall in three pieces, some of the young ones may escape. Is my prayer granted?”

“Indeed it is,” said the astonished King, as the Tree-Goddess faded from his vision.

The next morning the King called his children and his ministers and his foresters to him, and told them that he had changed his mind, and that the column for the new palace should be built of stone, not wood.

“For,” said he, “within the deodar tree lives a spirit nobler than my own.” And he told them of his vision, and they all marvelled.

And the King built his palace upon a great column of stone, and around its base he created a beautiful park, and the children of the city and the surrounding villages flocked to the gardens to sit on the grass and enjoy the many beautiful flowers and trees that had been planted on all sides.

Taking the example of the King, no one built their houses of wood any more. The houses were made of stone, and the great deodars were able to spread freely through the forests.

“And if you go up into the mountains,” said Grandmother, “you can still see those forests, all the way up the sacred river Ganga, to its source near the eternal snows.”



7 The Fight

Anil had been less than a month in Dehra when he discovered the pool in the forest. It was the height of summer, and the school he was to join had not yet opened. Having as yet made no friends in the small town in the foothills, he wandered about a good deal by himself, into the hills and forests that stretched away on all sides of the town.

It was hot, very hot, at that time of the year, and Anil, aged thirteen, walked about in his vest and shorts, his brown feet white with the chalky dust that flew up from the ground. The earth was parched, the grass brown, the trees listless, hardly stirring, waiting for a cool wind or a refreshing shower of rain. It was on one of these tiresome days that Anil found the pool in the forest. The

water had a gentle green translucency, and he could see the smooth round pebbles at the bottom of the pool. It was fed by a small stream that emerged from a cluster of rocks.

During the monsoon this stream would be a rushing torrent, cascading down from the hills; but during the summer it was barely a trickle. The rocks, however, held the water in the pool, and it didn't dry up like the pools in the plains.

When Anil saw the pool, he didn't hesitate to get into it. He had often been swimming, alone or with friends, when he had lived with his parents in a thirsty town in the middle of the Rajasthan desert. There, he had known only sticky, muddy pools, where buffaloes wallowed in the slush. He had never seen a pool like this – so clean and cool and inviting. He threw off all his clothes, as he had always done when swimming in the plains, and leapt into the water. His limbs were supple, and his dark body glistened in patches of sunlit water.

The next day he came again to quench his body in the cool waters of the forest pool. He was there for almost an hour, sliding in and out of the limpid green water, or lying stretched out on the smooth yellow rocks in the shade of broad-leaved sal trees.

It was while he lay naked on a rock that he noticed another boy standing a little distance away, staring at him in a rather hostile manner. The other boy was a year or two older than Anil, taller and thick-set, with a broad nose. He had only just noticed Anil, and he stood at the edge of the pool, wearing a pair of bathing shorts, waiting for Anil to explain himself.

When Anil didn't say anything, the other called out. "What are you doing here, mister?"

Anil, who was prepared to be friendly, was surprised at the other's hostility.

"I am swimming," he replied. "Why don't you join me?"

"I always swim alone," said the other. "This is my pool. I did not invite you to it. And why aren't you wearing any clothes?"

"It is not your business what I wear or do not wear. I have nothing to be ashamed of."

"You skinny fellow, put on your clothes!"

"Fat fool, take yours off!"

This was too much for the stranger. He strode up to Anil, who still sat on the rock; and, planting his broad feet firmly on the sand, said (as though it would settle the matter once and for all), "Don't you know I am a Punjabi? I do not take insults from villagers like you!"

"So you like to fight with villagers," said Anil. "Well, I do not belong to your village. I am a Rajput!"

"I am a Punjabi!"

"I am a Rajput!"

They had reached an impasse. One had said he was a Punjabi, the other had proclaimed himself a Rajput. There was little else that could be said.

"You understand that I am a Punjabi?" repeated the stranger, uneasily aware that the other had not seemed sufficiently impressed.

"I have heard you say it three times," replied Anil.

"Then why don't you run off?"

"I am waiting for you to run!"

"I shall have to thrash you," said the Punjabi boy,

assuming a violent attitude and showing Anil the palm of his hand.

"Let me see you do it," said Anil.

"You *will* see me do it," said the Punjabi boy.

Anil waited. The other boy made an odd, hissing sound. They stared each other in the eye for almost a minute. Then the Punjabi boy slapped Anil across the face with all his strength. Anil staggered back, feeling giddy. There were thick red finger-marks on his cheek.

"There you are," exclaimed his assailant. "Will you be off now?"

By way of reply, Anil swung his arm up and pushed a hard, bony fist into his adversary's face.

And then they were at each other's throats, swaying together on the rock, tumbling on to the sand, rolling over and over, their arms and legs locked in a fierce struggle. Clawing, grasping and cursing, they rolled right into the shallows of the pool.

Even in the water they continued fighting. Spluttering and covered with mud, they groped for each other's heads and throats. But after five minutes of frenzied struggle, neither boy had emerged victorious. Their bodies heaving with exhaustion, they stood back from each other, making tremendous efforts to speak.

"Now – now do you realise – I am a Punjabi?" gasped the stranger.

"Do you – know I am a Rajput?" said Anil with difficulty.

They gave a moment's consideration to each other's answers, and in that moment of silence there was only their heavy breathing and the rapid pounding of their hearts.

"Then you will not leave the pool?" said the Punjabi boy.

"I will not leave it," said Anil.

"Then we shall have to continue the fight," said the other.

"All right," said Anil.

But neither boy moved, neither took the initiative.

Then the Punjabi boy had an inspiration.

"We will continue the fight tomorrow," he said. "If you dare to come back tomorrow, we will continue the fight, and I will not let you off as easily as I have done today!"

"I will come tomorrow," said Anil. "I will be ready for you."

They turned their backs on each other and returned to their respective rocks, where they gathered their belongings, then left the forest by different routes.

When Anil got home, he found it difficult to account for the cuts and bruises that showed on his face, arms and legs. He could not conceal the fact that he had been in a bad fight, and his mother insisted on his staying at home for the rest of the day.

That evening, though, he slipped out of the house and went to the bazaar where he found comfort and solace in a bottle of vividly coloured lemonade and a banana-leaf full of hot, sweet jalebis. He had just finished the lemonade when he saw his recent adversary coming down the road.

Anil's first impulse was to turn away and look elsewhere; his second to throw the empty bottle at his enemy; but he did neither of these things. Instead, he

stood his ground and scowled at his opponent. And the Punjabi boy said nothing either, but scowled back with equal ferocity.

The next day was as hot as the previous one. Anil felt weak and lazy and not at all eager for a fight. His body was stiff and sore after the previous day's encounter. But he couldn't refuse the challenge. Not to turn up at the pool would be an acknowledgement of defeat. But from the way he was feeling, he knew he would be beaten in another fight. Yet he must defy his enemy, outwit him if possible. To surrender now would be to forfeit all rights to the pool in the forest; and he knew it was his pool.

He was half-hoping that the Punjabi boy would have forgotten the challenge, but as soon as Anil arrived he saw his opponent stripped to the waist, sitting on a rock at the far end of the pool. The Punjabi boy was rubbing oil on his body, massaging it into his broad thighs. He saw Anil beneath the sal trees, and called a challenge across the water.

"Come over to this side and fight!" he shouted.

But Anil was not going to submit to any conditions laid down by his opponent.

"Come *this* side and fight," he shouted back defiantly.

"Swim over and fight me here!" called the other. "Or perhaps you cannot swim the length of this pool!"

Anil could have swum the length of the pool a dozen times without tiring, and in this department he knew he could show the Punjabi boy his superiority. Slipping out of his vest and shorts, he dived straight into the water, cutting through it like a golden fish and surfacing with hardly a splash. The Punjabi boy's mouth hung open in amazement.

"You can dive!" he exclaimed.

"It is easy," said Anil, treading water and waiting for another challenge. "Can't you dive?"

"No," said the other. "I jump straight in. But if you will tell me how, I'll make a dive."

"It is easy," said Anil. "Stand straight on the rock, hold your arms out, and allow your head to displace your feet."

The Punjabi boy stood up, stiff and straight, stretched out his arms, and threw himself at the water. He landed flat on his belly, with a crash that sent the birds screaming out of the trees.

Anil burst into laughter.

"Are you trying to empty the pool?" he asked, as the Punjabi boy came to the surface, spouting water like a small whale.

"Wasn't it good?" asked the boy, evidently proud of his feat.

"Not very good," said Anil. "You should have more practice. See, I will do it again!"

And pulling himself up on a rock, he executed another perfect dive. The Punjabi boy waited for him to come up, but, swimming under water in a world of soft lights and crooked sunshine, Anil circled the boy and came up from behind.

"How did you do that?" asked the astonished youth.

"Can't you swim under water?" asked Anil.

"No, but I will try."

The Punjabi boy made a tremendous effort to plunge to the bottom of the pool; indeed, he thought he had gone right down, but his bottom, like a duck's, remained above the surface.

Anil, however, did not want to sound too discouraging. He was involved in a game of high diplomacy.

"That was not bad," he said. "But you need a lot of practice."

"Will you teach me?" asked his enemy.

"If you like, I will teach you."

"You must teach me. If you do not teach me, I will thrash you. Will you come here every day and teach me?"

"If you like," said Anil. They had pulled themselves out of the water and were sitting side by side on a smooth grey rock.

"My name is Vijay," said the Punjabi boy. "What is yours?"

"It is Anil."

"I am strong, am I not?" said Vijay, bending his arm so that a ball of muscle stood up.

"You are strong," said Anil. "You are like a wrestler, a pahlwan."

"One day I will be Mister Universe!" said Vijay, slapping his thighs, which shook with the impact of his hand.

He looked critically at Anil's hard, thin body. "You are quite strong yourself," he conceded, "but you are too bony. I know, you people do not eat enough. You must come and have your meals with me. I drink a pitcher of milk every day. You see, we have got our own cow. Be my friend, and I will make you a real pahlwan like me! I know – if you teach me to dive and swim under water, I will make you a pahlwan. This is fair, isn't it?"

"It's fair," said Anil, though he doubted if he was getting the better of the exchange.

Vijay put his arm around the younger boy's shoulders and said, "We are friends now, yes?"

They looked at each other with unflinching eyes, and in that moment a friendship was born.

"We are friends," said Anil.

The birds had settled again in the branches of the sal trees, and the pool was still and limpid in the afternoon shadows.

"It is our pool," said Vijay. "Nobody else can come here. Who would dare?"

"Yes, who would dare?" said Anil, smiling with the knowledge that he had won the day.



8 The Window

When Amir was thirteen, he decided that he was old enough to have a room of his own.

"What for?" asked his mother.

"The kids make too much noise," he said, referring to his younger brothers and sisters. "I can't study."

"Well, if you really want to study, you can have your own room," said his grandfather, who owned the old building. "There's the room on the roof."

So Amir took the room on the roof.

It was a long, low building with large cracks in the walls from which peepal trees were growing. Amir's grandfather said he couldn't afford to have it repaired. There were a number of tenants in the building and they were paying rents that had been fixed forty years back,

when rents were very low, so there wasn't much money coming in. Amir's father had a tailor's shop in the bazaar, but that didn't make much money either. The building had a flat roof, with just the one small room – called a barsati – opening on to it. From the window of his room Amir looked out upon a world quite different from the world below.

The banyan tree, just opposite, was his, and its inhabitants his subjects. There were two squirrels, several mynahs, a crow and, at night, a pair of flying foxes. The squirrels were busy in the afternoon, the birds in the morning and evening, the foxes at night. Amir wasn't very busy. He'd look at his books now and then, but decided that it wasn't a very good year for studying. There was much more to learn from looking out of his window.

At first he felt lonely in the room. But then he discovered the power of the window. It looked out on the banyan tree and the mango grove, on the rather untidy garden, on the broad path running past the building, and out over the roofs of other houses, over roads and fields, as far as the horizon. The path was a busy one: fruit and vegetable vendors came and went, as did the toy-seller and the balloon-man, their wares strung on poles; there were boys on cycles, babies in prams, schoolgirls chattering, housewives quarrelling, old men gossiping . . . all passed his way, the way of his window.

Early that summer a tonga came rattling and jingling down the path and stopped in front of the building. A girl and an elderly lady got down, while a servant unloaded their luggage. They went into the house and the tonga moved off.

The next day the girl looked up from the garden and saw Amir at the window.

She had black hair that came to her shoulders. Her eyes were black, like her hair, and just as shiny. She must have been about eleven years old.

"Hallo," said Amir.

She looked up at him suspiciously. "Who are you?" she asked.

"I am a ghost."

She laughed, and her laugh had a gay, mocking quality: "You look like one!"

Amir didn't think her remark was very funny, but he had asked for it.

"What are you doing up there?" she asked.

"Practising magic," he said.

She laughed again but this time without the mockery.

"I don't believe you," she said.

"Why don't you come up and see for yourself?"

She came round to the steps and began climbing them slowly, cautiously. When she entered the room, she stared at Amir and said: "Where's your magic?"

"Come here," he said, and he took her to the window and showed her his world.

She said nothing, just stared out of the window. Then she turned and smiled at Amir, and they were friends.

He only knew that she was called Chummo, and that she had come with her aunt for the summer months. He did not need to know any more about her, and she did not need to know any more about him except that he wasn't really a ghost.

She came up the steps nearly every day and joined Amir at the window. There was a lot of excitement to be

had in the world of the window, especially when the monsoon rains arrived.

At the first rumblings, women would rush outside to retrieve their washing from the clothes-line and, if there was a breeze, to chase a few garments across the compound. When the rain came, it came with a vengeance, making a bog of the garden and a river of the path.

A cyclist would come riding furiously down the path, an elderly gentleman would be having difficulty with his umbrella, naked toddlers would be frisking about in the rain. Sometimes Amir would run out on the roof and shout and dance in the rain. And the rain would come through the open door and window of the room, flooding the floor and making an island of the bed.

But the window was more fun than anything else.

"It's like a film," said Chummo. "The window is the screen, the world outside is the picture."

Soon the mangoes were ripe and Chummo was in the branches of the mango tree as often as she was at Amir's window. Amir was supposed to be deep in study, so any forays into the mango tree on his part would not have pleased his grandfather. But from the window he had a good view of the tree, and he could speak to Chummo from about the same level. She brought him unripe mangoes, and they ate far too many of them and had tummy aches for the rest of the day.

"Let's make a garden on the roof," said Chummo.

"How do we do that?" asked Amir.

"It's easy. We bring up mud and bricks and make the flower-beds. Then we plant the seeds. We'll grow all sorts of flowers."

"The roof will fall in," said Amir.

"Never mind," said Chummo.

They spent two days carrying buckets of mud up the steps to the roof and laying out the flower-beds. It was hard work, but Chummo did most of it. When the beds were ready, they had a planting ceremony. But apart from a few small plants collected from the garden below, they had only one kind of seed – pumpkin.

"I can't eat pumpkins," said Amir.

"Have you ever met anyone who likes pumpkins?" asked Chummo.

"No. Everyone hates them."

"True. And yet people keep on growing them, and selling them, and forcing children to eat them."

"They just do it to make us suffer," said Amir.

"True. We'll present our pumpkins to our enemies."

So they planted the pumpkin seeds in the mud and felt proud of themselves.

But the following night it rained very heavily, and in the morning they discovered that everything – except the bricks – had been washed away.

So they returned to the window.

A mynah had been in a fight and the feathers had been knocked off its head. A bougainvillaea creeper that had been climbing the wall had sent a long green shoot in through the window.

Chummo said, "Now we can't shut the window without spoiling the creeper."

"Then we won't close the window," said Amir.

And they let the creeper into the room.

The rains passed and an autumn wind came whispering

through the branches of the banyan tree. There were red leaves on the ground and the wind picked them up and blew them about so that they looked like butterflies. Amir would watch the sunrise, the sky all red until the first rays splashed the window-sill and crept up the walls of the room. And in the evening Chummo and Amir would watch the sun go down in a sea of fluffy clouds. Sometimes the clouds were pink, sometimes orange; they were nearly always coloured clouds, framed in the window.

"I'm going tomorrow," said Chummo one evening.

Amir was too surprised to say anything.

"You stay here all the time, don't you?" she said.

Amir nodded.

"When I come again next year, you'll still be here, won't you?"

"I suppose so," said Amir.

In the morning the tonga was at the door, and the servant, the aunt and Chummo were in it. Amir was at his window. Chummo waved up to him. Then the driver flicked the pony's reins, the tonga creaked and rattled, the bell jingled. Down the path and through the compound gate went the tonga, and all the time Chummo waved.

When the tonga was out of sight, Amir took the spray of bougainvillaea and pushed it out of the room. Then he closed the window. It would be opened only when the spring and Chummo came again.



9 Mukesh Starts a Zoo

On a visit to Delhi with his parents, Mukesh spent two crowded hours at the zoo. He was dazzled by the many colourful birds, fascinated by the reptiles, charmed by the gibbons and chimps, and awestruck by the big cats – the lions, tigers and leopards. There was no zoo in the small town of Dehra where he lived, and the jungle was some way across the river-bed. So, as soon as he got home, he decided that he would have a zoo of his own.

"I'm going to start a zoo," he announced at breakfast, the day after his return.

"But you don't have any birds or animals," said Dolly, his little sister.

"I'll soon find them," said Mukesh. "That's what a zoo is all about – collecting animals."

He was gazing at the white-washed walls of the verandah, where a gecko, a small wall lizard, was in pursuit of a fly. A little later Mukesh was trying to catch the lizard. But it was more alert than it looked, and always managed to keep a few inches ahead of his grasp.

"That's not the way to catch a lizard," said Teju, appearing on the verandah steps. Teju and his sister Koki lived next door.

"You catch it, then," said Mukesh.

Teju fetched a stick from the garden, where it had been used to prop up sweet-peas. He used the stick to tip the lizard off the wall and into a shoe-box.

"You'll be my Head Keeper," said Mukesh, and soon he and Teju were at work in the back garden setting up enclosures with a roll of wire-netting they had found in the poultry shed.

"What else can we have in the zoo?" asked Teju. "We need more than a lizard."

"There's your grandmother's parrot," said Mukesh.

"That's a good idea. But we won't tell her about it – not yet. I don't think she'd lend it to us. You see, it's a *religious* parrot. She's taught it lots of prayers and chants."

"Then people are sure to come and listen to it. They'll pay, too."

"We must have the parrot, then. What else?"

"Well, there's my dog," said Mukesh. "He's very fierce."

"But a dog isn't a zoo animal."

"Mine is – he's a *wild* dog. Look, he's black all over and he's got yellow eyes. There's no other dog like him."

Mukesh's dog, who spent most of his time sleeping on the verandah, raised his head and obligingly revealed his yellow eyes.

"He's got jaundice," said Teju.

"They've always been yellow."

"All right, then, we've got a lizard, a parrot and a black dog with yellow eyes."

"Koki has a white rabbit. Will she lend it to us?"

"I don't know. She thinks a lot of her rabbit. Maybe we can *rent* it from her."

"And there's Sitaram's donkey."

Sitaram, the dhobi-boy, usually used a donkey to deliver and collect the laundry from the houses along this particular street.

"Do you really want a donkey?" asked Teju doubtfully.

"Why not? It's a wild donkey. Haven't you heard of them?"

"I've heard of a wild ass, but not a wild donkey."

"Well, they're all related to each other – asses, donkeys and mules."

"Why don't you paint black stripes on it and call it a zebra?"

"No, that's cheating. It's got to be a proper zoo. No tricks – it's not a circus!"



On Saturday afternoon, a large placard with corrected

spelling announced the opening of the zoo. It hung from the branches of the jack-fruit tree. Children were allowed in free but grown-ups had to buy tickets at fifty paise each, and Koki and Dolly were selling home-made tickets to the occasional passer-by or parent who happened to look in. Mukesh and his friends had worked hard at making notices for the various enclosures and each resident of the zoo was appropriately named.

The first attraction was a large packing-case filled with an assortment of house-lizards. They looked rather sluggish, having been generously fed with a supply of beetles and other insects.

Then came an enclosure in which Koki's white rabbit was on display. Freshly washed and brushed, it looked very cuddly and was praised by all.

Staring at it with evil intent from behind wire-netting was Mukesh's dog – RARE BLACK DOG WITH YELLOW EYES read the notice. Those yellow eyes were now trying hard to hypnotise the pink eyes of Koki's nervous rabbit. The dog pawed at the ground, trying to dig its way out from under the fence to get at the rabbit.

Tethered to a mango tree was Sitaram's small donkey. And tacked to the tree was a placard saying WILD ASS FROM KUTCH. A distant relative it may have been, but everyone recognised it as the local washerman's beast of burden. Every now and then it tried to break loose, for it was long past its feeding time.

There was also a duck that did not seem to belong to anyone, and a small cow that had strayed in on its own; but the star attraction was the parrot. As it could recite three different prayers, over and over again, it was soon

surrounded by a group of admiring parents, all of whom wished they had a parrot who could pray, or rather, do their praying for them. Oddly enough, Koki's grandmother had chosen that day for visiting the temple, so she was unaware of the fuss that was being made of her pet, or even that it had been made an honorary member of the zoo. Teju had convinced himself she wouldn't mind.

While Mukesh and Teju were escorting visitors around the zoo, lecturing them on wild dogs and wild asses, Koki and Dolly were doing a brisk trade at the ticket counter. They had collected about ten rupees and were hoping for yet more, when there was a disturbance in the enclosures.

The black dog with yellow eyes had finally managed to dig his way out of his cage, and was now busy trying to dig his way *into* the rabbit's compartment. The rabbit was running round and round in panic-stricken circles. Meanwhile, the donkey had finally snapped the rope that held it and, braying loudly, scattered the spectators and made for home.

Koki went to the rescue of her rabbit and soon had it cradled in her arms. The dog now turned his attention to the duck. The duck flew over the packing-case, while the dog landed in it, scattering lizards in all directions.

In all this confusion, no one noticed that the door of the parrot's cage had slipped open. With a squawk and a whirr of wings, the bird shot out of the cage and flew off into a nearby orchard.

"The parrot's gone!" shouted Dolly, and almost immediately a silence fell upon the assembled visitors and children. Even the dog stopped barking. Granny's

praying parrot had escaped! How could they possibly face her? Teju wondered if she would believe him if he told her it had flown off to heaven.

"Can anyone see it?" he asked tearfully.

"It's in a mango tree," said Dolly. "It won't come back."

The crowd fell away, unwilling to share any of the blame when Koki's grandmother came home and discovered what had happened.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Teju, looking to Koki for help; but Koki was too upset to suggest anything. Mukesh had an idea.

"I know!" he said. "We'll get another one!"

"How?"

"Well, there's the ten rupees we've collected. We can buy a new parrot for ten rupees!"

"But won't Granny know the difference?" asked Teju.

"All these hill parrots look alike," said Mukesh.

So, taking the cage with them, they hurried off to the bazaar, where they soon found a bird-seller who was happy to sell them a parrot not unlike Granny's. He assured them it would talk.

"It *looks* like your grandmother's parrot," said Mukesh on the way home. "But can it pray?"

"Of course not," said Koki. "But we can teach it."

Koki's grandmother, who was short-sighted, did not notice the substitution; but she complained bitterly that the bird had stopped repeating its prayers and was instead making rude noises and even swearing occasionally.

Teju soon remedied this sad state of affairs.

THE ROAD TO THE BAZAAR

Every morning he stood in front of the parrot's cage and repeated Granny's prayers. Within a few weeks the bird had learnt to repeat one of them. Granny was happy again – not only because her parrot had started praying once more, but because Teju had started praying too!



10 The Boy Who Broke The Bank

Nathu, the sweeper-boy, grumbled to himself as he swept the steps of a small local bank, owned for the most part by Seth Govind Ram, a man of wealth whose haphazard business dealings had often brought him to the verge of ruin. Nathu used the small broom hurriedly and carelessly; the dust, after rising in a cloud above his head, settled down again on the steps. As Nathu was banging his pan against a dustbin, Sitaram, the washerman's son, passed by.

Sitaram was on his delivery round. He had a bundle of pressed clothes balanced on his head.

"Don't raise such a dust!" he called out to Nathu. "Are you annoyed because they are still refusing to pay you another five rupees a month?"

"I don't want to talk about it," complained the sweeper-boy. "I haven't even received my regular pay. And this is the end of the month. Soon two months' pay will be due. Who would think this was a bank, holding up a poor man's salary? As soon as I get my money, I'm off! Not another week will I work in the place."

And Nathu banged his pan against the dustbin two or three times more, just to emphasise his point and give himself confidence.

"Well, I wish you luck," said Sitaram. "I'll be on the look-out for a new job for you." And he plodded barefoot along the road, the big bundle of clothes hiding most of his head and shoulders.

At the fourth house he visited, delivering the washing, Sitaram overheard the woman of the house saying how difficult it was to get someone to sweep the courtyard. Tying up his bundle, Sitaram said: "I know a sweeper-boy who's looking for work. He might be able to work for you from next month. He's with Seth Govind Ram's bank just now, but they are not giving him his pay, and he wants to leave."

"Oh, is that so?" said Mrs Prakash. "And why aren't they paying him?"

"They must be short of money," said Sitaram with a shrug.

Mrs Prakash laughed. "Well, tell him to come and see me when he's free."

Sitaram, glad that he had been of some service both to a friend and to a customer, hoisted his bag on his shoulders and went on his way.

Mrs Prakash had to do some shopping. She gave instructions to her maidservant with regard to the baby

and told the cook what she wanted for lunch. Her husband worked for a large company, and they could keep servants and do things in style. Having given her orders, she set out for the bazaar to make her customary tour of the cloth shops.

A large, shady tamarind tree grew near the clock tower, and it was here that Mrs Prakash found her friend, Mrs Bhushan, sheltering from the heat. Mrs Bhushan was fanning herself with a large peacock's feather. She complained that the summer was the hottest in the history of the town. She then showed Mrs Prakash a sample of the cloth she was going to buy, and for five minutes they discussed its shade, texture and design. When they had exhausted the subject, Mrs Prakash said:

"Do you know, my dear, Seth Govind Ram's bank can't even pay its employees. Only this morning I heard a complaint from their sweeper-boy, who hasn't received his pay for two months!"

"It's disgraceful!" exclaimed Mrs Bhushan. "If they can't pay their sweeper, they must be in a bad way. None of the others can be getting paid either."

She left Mrs Prakash at the tamarind tree and went in search of her husband, who was found sitting under the fan in Jugal Kishore's electrical goods shop, playing cards with the owner.

"So there you are!" cried Mrs Bhushan. "I've been looking for you for nearly an hour. Where did you disappear to?"

"Nowhere," replied Mr Bhushan. "Had you remained stationary in one shop, you might have found me. But you go from one to another, like a bee in a flower-garden."

“Now don’t start grumbling. The heat is bad enough. I don’t know what’s happening to this town. Even the bank is going bankrupt.”

“What did you say?” said Mr Jugal Kishore, sitting up suddenly. “Which bank?”

“Why, Seth Govind Ram’s bank, of course. I hear they’ve stopped paying their employees – no salary for over three months! Don’t tell me you have an account with them, Mr Kishore?”

“No, but my neighbour has!” he said, and he called out to the keeper of the barber shop next door: “Faiz Hussain, have you heard the latest? Seth Govind Ram’s bank is about to collapse! You’d better take your money out while there’s still time.”

Faiz Hussain, who was cutting the hair of an elderly gentleman, was so startled that his hand shook and he nicked his customer’s ear. The customer yelped with pain and distress: pain, because of the cut, and distress, because of the awful news he had just heard. With one side of his neck still unshorn, he leapt out of his chair and sped across the road to a general merchant’s store, where there was a telephone. He dialled Seth Govind Ram’s number. The Seth was not at home. Where was he, then? The Seth was holidaying in Kashmir. Oh, was *that* so? The elderly gentleman did not believe it. He hurried back to the barber shop and told Faiz Hussain: “The bird has flown! Seth Govind Ram has left town. Definitely, it means a collapse. I’ll have the rest of my haircut another time.” And he dashed out of the shop and made a bee-line for his office and cheque book.

The news spread through the bazaar with the rapidity of

a forest fire. From the general merchant’s it travelled to the tea-shop, circulated amongst the customers, and then spread with them in various directions, to the paan-seller, the tailor, the fruit-vendor, the jeweller, the beggar sitting on the pavement . . .

Old Ganpat, the beggar, had a crooked leg and had been squatting on the pavement for years, calling for alms. In the evening someone would come with a barrow and take him away. He had never been known to walk. But now, on learning that the bank was about to collapse, Ganpat astonished everyone by leaping to his feet and actually running at a good speed in the direction of the bank. It soon became known that he had well over a thousand rupees in savings.

Men stood in groups at street corners, discussing the situation. There hadn’t been so much excitement since India last won a Test Match. The small town in the foot-hills seldom had a crisis, never had floods or earthquakes or droughts. And so the imminent crash of the local bank set everyone talking and speculating and rushing about in a frenzy.

Some boasted of their farsightedness, congratulating themselves on having taken out their money, or on never putting any in. Others speculated on the reasons for the crash, putting it all down to Seth Govind Ram’s pleasure-loving ways. The Seth had fled the state, said one. He had fled the country, said another. He had a South American passport, said a third. Others insisted that he was hiding somewhere in the town. And there was a rumour that he had hanged himself from the tamarind tree, where he had been found that morning by the sweeper-boy.

Someone who had a relative working as a clerk in the bank decided to phone him and get the facts.

"I don't know anything about it," said the clerk, "except that half the town is here, trying to take their money out. Everyone seems to have gone mad!"

"There's a rumour that none of you have been paid."

"Well, all the clerks have had *their* salaries. We wouldn't be working otherwise. It may be that some of the part-time workers are getting paid late, but that isn't due to a shortage of money – only a few hundred rupees – it's just that the clerk who looks after their payments is on sick leave. You don't expect *me* to do his work, do you?" And he put the telephone down.

By afternoon the bank had gone through all its ready money, and the harassed manager was helpless. Emergency funds could only be obtained from one of the government banks, and now it was nearly closing time. He wasn't sure he could persuade the crowd outside to wait until the following morning. And Seth Govind Ram could be of no help from his luxury houseboat in Kashmir, five hundred miles away.

The clerks shut down their counters. But the people gathered outside on the steps of the bank, shouting: "We want our money!" "Give it to us today, or we'll break in!" "Fetch Seth Govind Ram, we know he's hiding in the vaults!"

Mischief-makers, who did not have a paisa in the bank, joined the crowd. The manager stood at the door and tried to calm his angry customers. He declared that the bank had plenty of money, that they could withdraw all they wanted the following morning.

"We want it now!" chanted the people. "Now, now, now!"

A few stones were thrown, and the manager retreated indoors, closing the iron-grille gate.

A brick hurtled through the air and smashed into the plate-glass window which advertised the bank's assets.

Then the police arrived. They climbed the steps of the bank and, using their long sticks, pushed the crowd back until people began falling over each other. Gradually everyone dispersed, shouting that they would be back in the morning.

Nathu arrived next morning to sweep the steps of the bank.

He saw the refuse and the broken glass and the stones cluttering up the steps. Raising his hands in horror, he cried: "Goondas! Hooligans! May they suffer from a thousand ills! It was bad enough being paid irregularly – now I must suffer an increase of work!" He smote the steps with his broom, scattering the refuse.

"Good morning, Nathu," said Sitaram, the washerman's son, getting down from his bicycle. "Are you ready to take up a new job from the first of next month? You'll have to, I suppose, now that the bank is closing."

"What did you say?" said Nathu.

"Haven't you heard? The bank's gone bankrupt. You'd better hang around until the others arrive, and then start demanding your money too. You'll be lucky if you get it!" He waved cheerfully, and pedalled away on his bicycle.

Nathu went back to sweeping the steps, muttering to himself. When he had finished, he sat down on the

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bottom step to await the arrival of the manager. He was determined to get his pay.

“Who would have thought the bank would collapse,” he said to himself, and looked thoughtfully across the street. “I wonder how it could have happened . . .”



11 Koki Plays The Game

“There’s a cricket match on Saturday, isn’t there?” asked Koki.

“That’s right,” said Ranji. “We’re playing the Public School team.”

“I might come and watch,” said Koki.

“As you like. It won’t be much of a game. We’ll beat them easily.”

Ranji’s own cricket team was quite different from his school team. It consisted of boys big and small, long and short, from various walks of life. Even Koki, a girl, was allowed honorary membership, and had sometimes been ‘twelfth man’ – an extra. She knew the game well, and often bowled to Ranji in the mornings when he wanted batting practice. Only a couple of the team-

members could afford to go to private schools like Ranji's; most of them went to the local government school, and two or three had stopped going to school altogether.

There was Bhartu, who delivered newspapers in the mornings; the brothers Mukesh and Rakesh, whose father kept a sweet shop; and a tailor's son, Amir Ali. There was Billy Jones, an Anglo-Indian boy; 'Lumboo' – the Tall One; Sitaram, the washerman's son, and several others. And there was also Bhim, who couldn't play at all, but who made a good umpire (when his glasses weren't steamed over) and who accompanied the team wherever it went.

This Saturday they were playing on their 'home' ground, a patch of wasteland behind a new cinema called the *Apsara* ('Heavenly Dancer').

The Public School boys had all arrived first, which was only natural since they lived together in the same boarding-school. The members of Ranji's team came from different directions, so it was some time before they had all assembled. Even then they were two short. But Ranji won the toss and decided to bat, hoping that the missing team-members would arrive in time to take their turn at the wicket.

"If Mukesh and Rakesh aren't here in time, we won't have them in the team," said Ranji sternly.

"Don't sack them," said Lumboo. "They always bring us sweets and snacks from their father's shop. We need them in the team even if they don't score any runs."

"Well, if they turn up *without* refreshments, they'll be sacked," said Ranji, always ready to be fair.

The two umpires had gone out to set up the stumps – Bhim, on behalf of Ranji's team, and a teacher from the Public School.

"I don't like the look of that teacher," said Amir Ali.

"Well, we won't take any risks."

Billy Jones and Lumboo always opened the batting. Lumboo's height helped him to deal with the fast-rising ball. He took the first ball.

The Public School's opening bowler was speedy but inaccurate. This was because he was trying to bowl too fast. His first ball went for a wide, which gave Ranji's team its first run. The second ball wasn't quite so wide, but it was still about a foot from the leg stump. Lumboo took a swipe at it and missed. The third ball pitched half-way down the wicket and kept low. It struck Lumboo on the pads.

"How's that!" shouted the bowler, wicket-keeper and slip-fielders in unison.

The Public School's umpire did not hesitate. Up went his finger. Lumboo was given out leg-before-wicket.

Lumboo stood aghast. He looked down at where his feet were placed, then back at his stumps.

"I'm not in front of the wicket," he complained to no one in particular.

"The umpire's word is law," said the wicket-keeper.

Lumboo slowly walked back to where his team-mates reclined against a pile of bricks.

"I wasn't out!" he protested.

"Never mind," said Ranji, whose turn it was to bat. "You'll get your chance when you come on to bowl."

He walked to the wicket with a confident air, his bat resting on his shoulder. He took guard carefully and,

tapping his bat on the ground, faced the bowler. He received a straight ball, fast, and met it on the half-volley, driving it straight back past the bowler. It sped to the boundary, amidst delighted cries from Ranji's team-mates. Four runs.

The next ball was short, just outside the off-stump. Ranji stepped back and square-cut it past point. Another four. There were more cheers, and this time Ranji distinctly heard a girl's voice shouting: "Good shot, Ranji!"

He looked back to where his team-mates were gathered. There was no girl among them. He turned and looked toward the opposite boundary, and there, under the giant cinema hoarding, stood Koki. She waved to him.

Ranji did not wave back. He felt acutely self-conscious. Settling down to face the bowler again, he was aware of two things at once – of the bowler making faces and charging up to bowl, and of Koki standing on the boundary and waiting for him to hit another four. This loss of concentration caused him to misjudge the next ball. Instead of playing forward, he played back. The ball took the edge of his bat and flew straight into the wicket-keeper's gloves.

"How's that!" shouted all the fielders, appealing for a catch.

Ranji did not wait for the umpire – in this case, Bhim – to give him out. He knew he'd touched the ball. Scowling, he walked back to his team. It was all Koki's fault!

Now there was a good partnership between Sitaram and Bhartu. Sitaram, who helped his father with the

town's washing on Sundays, was in the habit of laying out clothes on a flat stone and pounding them with a stout stick – the method followed by most washermen. He dealt with the cricket-ball in much the same way – clouting it hard, and sending it to various points of the compass. He hit up twenty-five valuable runs before he was out, caught off a big hit. Bhartu pushed and prodded, merely keeping one end going, until he too was out to an LBW decision. Billy Jones had gone the same way, taking the ball on his pads. No one was happy with the LBW decisions.

"We must have neutral umpires," said Amir Ali.

"But who wants to be an umpire?" said Ranji. "We won't find anyone. We'll have to use our own team members – or let the other side provide *both* umpires!"

"Not after today," said Lumboo.

Meanwhile, Mukesh and Rakesh had arrived, carrying paper-bags full of samosas and jalebis. As a result, everyone cheered up. Wickets fell almost as rapidly as the snacks and sweets were consumed. Mukesh and Rakesh, who were the last men in, held out for several overs until Rakesh was given out – LBW! Ranji's team was all out for 87 runs – not really a match-winning score, except on a tricky wicket.

It was the Public School team's turn to bat. One of their opening batsmen was bowled by Lumboo for nought. The other batsman was twice rapped on the pads by balls from Ranji, but his loud appeals for LBW were turned down – by the Public School's umpire, naturally! Muttering to himself, Ranji hurled down a thunderbolt of a ball. It rose sharply and struck the batsman on the hand. Howling with pain, he dropped

his bat and wrung his hand. Then he showed everyone a swollen finger and decided to 'retire hurt'.

"There's more than one way of getting them out," muttered Ranji, as he passed the umpire.

The next two batsmen were good players, not as nervous as the openers. One of them got what might have been a faint tickle to an out-swing from Lumboo, but he was given the benefit of the doubt by Bhim – who, as umpires went, was as impartial as a star. He showed no favours to his own team, no matter what the other umpire did. It just isn't fair, thought Ranji.

The number three and four batsmen put on forty runs between them, and by mid-afternoon Ranji's players were feeling tired and hungry. Then three quick wickets fell to Sitaram's spinners. Three wickets remained, and twenty runs were needed by the Public School for victory.

This was when Bhartu, running to take a catch, collided with chubby Mukesh. Both of them went sprawling on the grass, and when they got up the ball was found lodged in the back of Mukesh's pants. How it got there no one could tell, but after much discussion the umpires had to agree that it qualified as a catch and the batsman was given out. But Bhartu had to leave the ground with a bleeding nose.

Ranji looked around for a replacement. There was no one in sight except Koki.

"Come and field," said Ranji brusquely.

Koki needed no persuading. She slipped off her sandals and dashed barefoot on to the field, taking up Bhartu's position near the boundary.

The tail-end batsmen were now swinging at the ball in

a desperate attempt to hit off the remaining runs. A hard-hit drive sped past Koki and went for four runs. Ranji gave her a hard look. Then the two batsmen got into a muddle while trying to take a quick run, and one of them was run out.

The last man came in. The Public School was eight runs behind. But a couple of boundaries would take care of that.

The batsmen ran two. And then one of them, over-confident and sure of victory, swung out at a slow, tempting ball from Sitaram, and the ball flew towards Koki in a long, curving arc.

Koki had to run a few yards to her left. Then she leapt like a gazelle and took the ball in both hands.

Ranji's team had won, and Koki had made the winning catch.

It was her last appearance as 'twelfth man'. From that day onwards she was a regular member of the team.



12 Home

"The boy's useless," said Mr Kapoor, speaking to his wife but making sure his son could hear. "I don't know what he'll do with himself when he grows up. He takes no interest in his studies."

Suraj's father had returned from a business trip and was seeing his son's school report for the first time.

"Good at cricket," said the report. "Poor in studies. Does not pay attention in class."

Suraj's mother, a quiet, dignified woman, said nothing. Suraj stood at the window, refusing to speak. He stared out at the light drizzle that whispered across the garden. He had angry black eyes and bushy eyebrows, and he was feeling rebellious.

His father was doing all the talking. "What's the use

of spending money on his education if he can't show anything for it? He comes home, eats as much as three boys, asks for money, and then goes out to loaf with his friends!"

Mr Kapoor paused, expecting Suraj to reply and give cause for further scolding; but Suraj knew that silence would irritate his father even more, and there were times when he enjoyed watching his father get irritated.

"Well, I won't stand for it," said Mr Kapoor finally. "If you don't make some effort, my boy, you can leave this house!" And having at last addressed Suraj directly, he stormed out of the room.

Suraj remained a few moments at the window. Then he went to the front door, opened it, stepped out into the rain, and banged the door behind him.

His mother made as if to call out after him, but she thought better of it, and turned and walked into the kitchen.

Suraj stood in the drizzle, looking back at the house.

"I'll never go back," he said fiercely. "I can manage without them. If they want me back, they can come and *ask* me to return!"

And he thrust his hands into his pockets and walked down the road with an independent air.

His fingers came into contact with a familiar crispness, a five-rupee note. It was all the money he had in the world. He clutched it tight. He had meant to spend it at the cinema, but now it would have to serve more urgent needs. He wasn't sure what these needs would be because just now he was angry and his mind wasn't running on practical lines. He walked blindly, unconscious of the rain, until he reached the maidaan.

When he reached the maidaan, the sun came out.

Though there was still a drizzle, the sun seemed to raise Suraj's spirits at once. He remembered his friend Ranji and decided he would stay with Ranji until he found some sort of work. He knew that if he didn't find work, he wouldn't be able to stay away from home for long. He wondered what kind of work a thirteen-year-old could get. He did not fancy delivering newspapers or serving tea in a small teashop in the bazaar; it was much better being a customer.

The drizzle ceased altogether, and Suraj hurried across the maidaan and down a quiet road until he reached Ranji's house. When he went in at the gate, his spirits sank.

The house was shut. There was a lock on the front door. Suraj went round the house three times but he couldn't find an open door or window. Perhaps, he thought, the family have gone out for the morning – a picnic or birthday treat; they were sure to be back for lunch. With spirits mounting once again, he strolled leisurely down the road, in the direction of the bazaar.

Suraj had a weakness for the bazaar, for its crowded variety of goods, its smells and colours and the music playing over the loudspeakers. He lingered now at a tea-and-pakora shop, tempted by the appetising smells that came from inside; but decided that he would eat at Ranji's house and spend his money on something other than food. He couldn't resist the big yellow yo-yo in the toy-seller's glass case; it was set with pieces of different coloured glass which shone and twinkled in the sunshine.

"How much?" asked Suraj.

"Two rupees," said the shop-keeper. "But to a regular customer like you I give it for one rupee."

"It must be an old one," said Suraj, but he paid the rupee and took possession of the yo-yo. He immediately began working it, strolling through the bazaar with the yo-yo swinging up and down from his index finger.

Fingering the four remaining notes in his pocket, he decided that he was thirsty. Not tap-water, nor a fizzy drink, but only a vanilla milk-shake would meet his need. He sat at a table and sucked milk-shake through a straw. One eye caught sight of the clock on the wall. It was nearly one o'clock. Ranji and his family should be home by now.

Suraj slipped off his chair, paid for the drink – that left him with two rupees – and went sauntering down the bazaar road, the yo-yo making soothing sounds beside him.

Ranji's house was still shut.

This was something Suraj hadn't anticipated. He walked quickly round the house, but it was locked as before. On his second round he met the gardener, an old man over sixty.

"Where is everybody?" asked Suraj.

"They have gone to Delhi for a week," said the gardener, looking sharply at Suraj. "Why, is anything the matter?"

Suraj had never seen the old man before, but he did not hesitate to confide in him. "I've left home. I was going to stay with Ranji. Now there's nowhere to go."

The old man thought this over for a minute. His face was wrinkled like a walnut, his hands and feet hard and cracked; but his eyes were bright and almost youthful.

He was a part-time gardener, who worked for several families along the road; there were no big gardens in this part of the town.

"Why don't you go home again?" he suggested.

"It's too soon," said Suraj. "I haven't really run away as yet. They must *know* I've run away. Then they'll feel sorry!"

The gardener smiled. "You should have planned it better," he said. "Have you saved any money?"

"I had five rupees this morning. Now there are two rupees left." He looked down at his yo-yo. "Would you like to buy it?"

"I wouldn't know how to work it," said the gardener. "The best thing for you to do is to go home, wait till Ranji gets back, and *then* run away."

Suraj considered this interesting advice, and decided that there was something in it. But he didn't make up his mind right away. A little suspense at home would be a good thing for his parents.

He returned to the maidaan and sat down on the grass. As soon as he sat down, he felt hungry.

He had never felt so hungry before. Visions of tandoori chickens and dripping spangled sweets danced before him. He wondered if the toy-seller would take back the yo-yo. He probably would, for half the price; but, as much as Suraj wanted food, he did not want to give up the yo-yo.

There was nothing to do but go home. His mother, he was sure, would be worried by now. His father (he hoped) would be pacing up and down the verandah, glancing at his watch every few seconds. It would be a lesson to them. He would walk back into the house as if

doing them a favour.

He only hoped they had kept his lunch.

Suraj walked into the sitting-room and threw his yo-yo on the sofa.

Mr Kapoor was sitting in his favourite armchair, reading a newspaper prior to going back to his office. He stood up for a moment as Suraj came into the room, said "You're very late," and returned to his newspaper.

Suraj found his mother and his food in the kitchen. She did not speak to him, but was smiling to herself.

"Feeling hungry?" she asked.

"No," said Suraj, and seized the tray and tucked into his food.

When he returned to the sitting-room he was surprised to see his father fumbling with the yo-yo.

"How do you work this stupid thing?" said Mr Kapoor.

Suraj didn't reply. He just stood there gloating over his father's clumsiness. At last he couldn't help bursting into laughter.

"It's easy," he said. "I'll show you." And he took the yo-yo from his father and gave a demonstration.

When Mrs Kapoor came into the room she did not appear at all surprised to find her husband and son deeply absorbed in the working of a cheap bazaar toy. She was used to such absurdities. Men never really grew up.

Mr Kapoor had forgotten he was supposed to be returning to his office, and Suraj had forgotten about running away. They had both forgotten the morning's unpleasantness. That had been a long, long time ago.



13 *The Visitor*

Amir was sitting on his bed, staring out of the door that opened out onto the roof. The bald mynah bird stared back at him. Then he heard someone calling from downstairs.

"Does anyone live up there?"

"No," shouted Amir. "Nobody lives up here."

"Then can I come up?" asked the person below.

Amir didn't answer. Presently he heard footsteps coming up. The mynah bird flew off the roof and settled in a mango tree.

A boy stood in the doorway, smiling at Amir. He was a little taller than Amir, and much thinner. He wore a white shirt outside striped pyjamas. On his feet were open slippers. A tray hung from his shoulders, filled with an assortment of goods.

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"Would you like to buy something?" he asked.

In his tray were combs, buttons, reels of thread, shoe-laces, little vials of cheap perfume.

"I have everything you need," he said.

"I don't need anything," said Amir.

"You need buttons."

"I don't."

"Your top button is missing."

Amir felt for the top button of his shirt and was surprised to find it missing.

"I don't like buttoning my shirt," he said.

"That's different," said his visitor, and looked him up and down for further signs of wear and tear. "You'd better buy a new pair of shoe-laces."

Amir looked down at his shoes and said, "I've got laces."

"Very poor quality," said the boy, and taking hold of one of the laces, he tugged at it and snapped it in two. "See how easily it breaks? Now you need laces."

"Well, I'm not buying any," said Amir.

The boy sighed, shrugged, and moved towards the door. As he walked slowly down the steps, Amir stood in the doorway, watching him go. On an impulse, he called out, "What's your name?"

"Mohan," replied the boy.

"Well, come again in a week," said Amir. "I may need something then."

Amir went downstairs for his lunch. He returned to his room to study, but dozed off instead. Towards evening he felt hungry and restless. He could not remain in his room when everyone else was pouring into the streets to

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shop and talk and eat and visit the cinema.

From the roof he could see the bazaar lights coming on, and hear the jingle of tonga bells and the blare of bus horns. It was a cool evening and he put on his coat before going downstairs.

It was not easy to walk fast on the road to the bazaar. Apart from the great number of pedestrians, there were cyclists and scooter-rickshaws, handcarts and cows, all making movement difficult. A little tea-shop played film music over a loudspeaker, adding noise to the general confusion.

The balloon-man was having a trying time. He was surrounded by a swarm of children who were more intent on bursting his balloons than on buying any. One or two got loose and went sailing over the heads of the crowd to burst over the fire in the chaat shop.

Amir stood outside the chaat shop and ate a variety of spicy snacks. Then he wiped his fingers on the banana leaves on which he had been served, and moved on down the bazaar road.

Towards the clock tower the road grew wider and less crowded. There was a street lamp at the corner of the road. A boy was sitting on the pavement beneath the lamp, bent over a book, absorbed in what he was reading. He seemed not to notice the noise of the bazaar or the chill in the air. As Amir came nearer, he saw that the boy was Mohan.

He did not know whether to stop and talk to him, or carry on down the road. After walking some distance, he felt ashamed at not having stopped to greet the boy, so he turned and retraced his steps. But when he came to the lamp-post, Mohan had gone.

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★

When Mohan came again he did not call out from below but came straight up to the room. He looked at Amir's shirt and shoes and saw that one of the shoes was still done up with half a lace. With an air of triumph he dropped a pair of shoe-laces on the desk.

"I can't pay for them now," said Amir.

"You can pay me later."

Amir sat on the edge of his table while Mohan leant against the wall.

"Do you go to school?" asked Amir.

"Sometimes I go to evening classes," Mohan said. "I am sitting privately for my High School exams next month. If I pass . . ."

He stopped to think about the things he could do if he passed. The way to a career would be open to him, he could study further, become an engineer, or a scientist or an administrator. No more selling combs and buttons at street corners . . .

"Where are your parents?" asked Amir.

"My father is dead. My mother is in our village in the hills. I have brothers and sisters at home, but I am the only one old enough to work."

"Then where do you stay?"

"Anywhere. On somebody's verandah, or on the maidaan; it doesn't matter much in the summer. These days I sleep on the station platform. It's quite warm there."

"You can sleep here," said Amir.

One morning, when he opened the door of his room, Amir found Mohan asleep at the top of the steps. He had

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wrapped himself up in a thin blanket. His tray of merchandise lay a short distance away.

Amir shook him gently and he woke up immediately, blinking in the bright sunlight.

“Why didn’t you come in?” asked Amir. “Why didn’t you let me know you were here?”

“It was late,” said Mohan. “I did not want to wake you. Besides, it was a fine night, not too cold.”

“Someone could have stolen your things.”

Amir made Mohan promise to sleep in the room that night. He came quite early. Amir lent him another blanket, and he lay down on the floor-mat and slept soundly, while Amir stayed awake worrying if his guest was comfortable enough.

Mohan came quite often, leaving early in the morning before Amir could offer him a meal. He ate at little places in the bazaar.

The High School exams were nearing, and Mohan sat up late with his books. Apart from his occasional evening classes, he received no teaching.

The exams lasted for ten days, and during this time Mohan put aside his tray of odds and ends. He did his papers with confidence. He thought he had done rather well. And when it was over, he took up his tray again and walked all over the town, trying to make up for lost sales.

On the day the exam results were due, Amir rose early. He got to the news agency at five o’clock, just as the morning papers arrived. Bhartu gave him a paper to look at and he found the page on which the results were listed. He looked down the ‘passes’ column for the

town, but couldn’t find Mohan’s number on the list. He looked twice to make sure, and then returned the paper to Bhartu with a glum look.

“Failed?” said Bhartu.

Amir nodded and turned away. When he returned to the room, he found Mohan sitting at the top of the steps. He didn’t have to tell him anything. Mohan knew by the look on the other’s face.

Amir sat down beside him, and they said nothing for a while.

“Never mind,” said Mohan. “I’ll pass next year.” It seemed that Amir was more in need of comforting than himself.

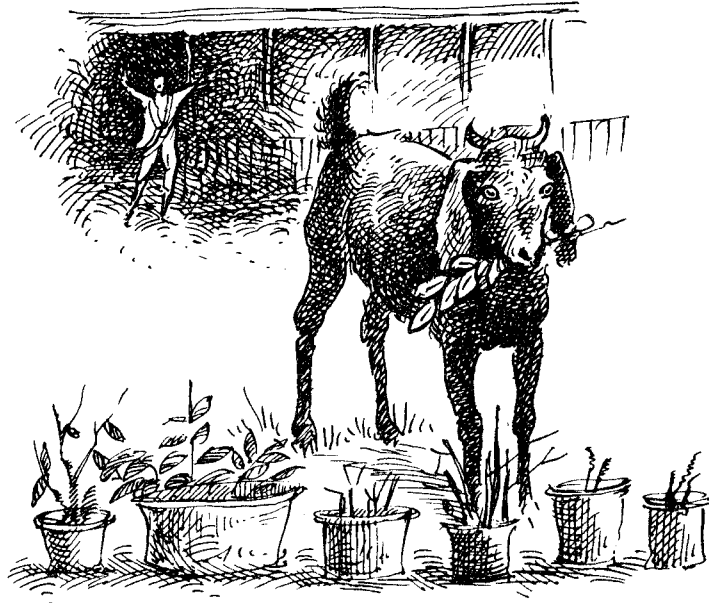
“If only you’d had more time,” said Amir.

“I have plenty of time now. Another year . . . Can I still stay in your room?”

“For as long as it’s my room. That means I shall have to work too, otherwise my grandfather will drag me downstairs again.”

Mohan laughed and went into the room. When he came out, the tray was hanging from his shoulders.

“What would you like to buy?” he asked. “I have everything you need.”



14 Mukesh Keeps a Goat

Mukesh's favourite pet was the little black goat who followed him home from the mustard fields one day.

Each year, before the monsoon rains came, the little Song River outside Dehra was just a narrow stream. Mukesh liked wading across it and then wandering through the fields and tea gardens on the other side, watching the men moving about among the yellow mustard and the women in their bright red saris picking tea.

He had been sitting on the bank of a small irrigation canal, gazing at a couple of herons fishing in the muddy water, when he felt something bump his elbow. Looking around, he found at his side a little goat, jet black and soft as velvet, with lovely grey eyes. Neither her

owner nor her mother was around.

She continued to nudge Mukesh, so he looked in his pockets for nourishment and, finding the remains of a samosa, held it out to her. She ate it eagerly, then sat down beside him and began nibbling at the grass.

A little later, when Mukesh got up to leave, the goat rose too. And when he started walking home, she followed unsteadily, her thin legs taking her this way and that.

"Go home!" said Mukesh as she danced around him. But it was clear that she had forgotten the way home, because she followed him to the river-bed. It was obvious that her trembling legs would not stand up to the current, so he took her in his arms and carried her across the stream. When he set her down, she remained by his side, rubbing against his legs.

Mukesh set out for home at a brisk pace, feeling sure that he would soon leave the little goat behind. But her legs were stronger than he had supposed. She came hopping along, right up to the gate of the house.

There was nothing he could do but carry her in and present her to his parents. "She's my friend," he announced.

"Not another pet!" said his mother when she saw the goat on the verandah, lapping a saucer of milk. "I've told you again and again that I will not have any animals in or around the house!"

It was easy to understand his mother's objections. Only a few weeks previously Mukesh had started his own zoo in the back garden. As a result, their neighbours' parrot, borrowed and put on display, had escaped; the washerman's donkey had gone missing for

two days; and Mukesh's mother had found her kitchen full of fleeing lizards.

"And besides," she said, "your dog won't be happy with a goat in the house."

But Mukesh's black dog (with yellow eyes) merely looked up from the bone he was gnawing at the other end of the verandah, and paid no attention to the newcomer. There would be no competition from a grass-eater who could not dig for bones!

"Goat's milk is good for your health," said Mukesh. "I read about it somewhere. That's why I brought her home. You haven't been looking well this week, Mother."

The prospect of an eventual supply of free milk tilted the decision in favour of keeping the goat, even though they knew it would be some time before it would provide any. Mukesh's little sister Dolly did not think highly of the new pet. "It *smells*," was all she said, when asked her opinion. So Mukesh gave his pet a liberal sprinkling of his mother's jasmine perfume, with the result that she reeked of perfume for a week.

But there was something fairy-like about the little goat, and Mukesh named her Pari, meaning 'fairy'. She skipped about very daintily, and her feet seemed equipped with springs when she leaped around the small lawn. To make the name even more fitting, Mukesh tied a little bell to her neck so he'd always know by its fairy tinkling where she was.

She loved an early-morning walk and was in many ways as good or even a better companion than a dog: she did not wander off on her own or get into quarrels with cows, cats, stray dogs, or porcupines. The only things

she chased were butterflies, and she would tumble into ditches and slither down slopes in her eagerness to follow them.

But unlike fairies, who never grow up, Mukesh's Pari had to grow up, and she soon developed a neat little pair of horns. Her appetite began to increase, too. She loved the leaves and flowers of the sweet-pea, the nasturtium and the geranium. These were also Mukesh's father's favourite garden flowers! It was he, rather than Mukesh's mother, who loved growing flowers, and every year his sweet-peas won prizes at the annual Flower Show.

One morning he found most of his sweet-peas destroyed. Hastily Mukesh blamed a cow, suggesting that it had got into the garden during the night. His father made no comment, but gave him a look that suggested he knew just who the culprit was; it was obvious that he bitterly regretted having allowed Mukesh to keep the goat. By the time the Flower Show came around, he had only his zinnias left – apparently the goat disliked zinnias – and they won third prize. Mukesh took care to keep the goat well out of his father's sight.

Of course, trouble, just like unseasonal rain, came when Mukesh was least expecting it.

Pari, having discovered various uses to which she could put her horns, began trying them out at almost every opportunity. A part-time gardener, who had never been known to grumble, came to Mukesh's mother to complain that he had been bending over the sweet-pea bed, putting it right again, when the goat had come up quietly and butted him from behind. He

refused to work in the garden unless Pari was tied up.

“And by the way,” said Mukesh’s mother to her son, after she had been calmed down, “when are we going to have that milk we were promised?”

It wasn’t long before the postman, the fruit-seller and the newspaper boy all had complaints to make. They dared not turn their backs on the playful young goat.

Events reached a climax during the visit of one of Mukesh’s aunts. Chachi (his father’s sister) was in the habit of bending over flower-pots and holding brief conversations with the flowers. She said it helped them grow faster.

She was poised over a pot, talking to a geranium, when the goat, suspecting that Chachi was eating the leaves, decided to butt this intruder out of the way of her favourite snack.

Chachi did not take kindly to being pushed off the verandah. She insisted that she had been badly bruised, though she refused all offers of first-aid from Mukesh.

It was the end of the goat’s comfortable stay with the family. Mukesh’s father asked Nathu, the newspaper boy, to take her straight to the bazaar and sell her at any price to the first customer that came along.

Mukesh stood at the gate and watched his Pari being led away. She kept looking back and bleating, probably wondering why Mukesh wasn’t accompanying her on this particular walk.

Nathu gave Mukesh a smile and a wink, as if to suggest that all would be well. Nathu had worked as a cleaner at a local co-op bank before it had collapsed; now he sold newspapers; but his ‘banking experience’, as he put it, had made him a good judge of a promising

investment. When he came back from the bazaar, he announced that the goat had been sold, and handed Mukesh’s father a fifty-rupee note. But later, when he was alone with Mukesh, he told him that he had bought the goat himself, and that Mukesh could come and see her from time to time in her new home behind the bazaar.

Mukesh did visit her sometimes. And in due course he found her with a little kid. Pari had also become a good provider of milk, and Nathu and his small brothers and sisters were great milk drinkers. She was on good terms with everyone in the family and only butted strangers who bowed too low when entering or leaving by the small courtyard door.



15 *Koki's Song*

When Koki was nearly twelve, she and her mother went to spend part of the year with Koki's maternal grandmother who lived in a lonely old house near the river-bed. Her mother was busy all day, cooking and washing clothes, while her grandmother, a round, bouncy little woman, would sit in the sun recounting stories from her own childhood.

Koki would spend the morning helping her mother and the afternoons talking to her grandmother. Towards evening the old lady would go indoors, and then Koki would be on her own in the large garden.

The garden had not been looked after too well, and it was over-run with semi-wild marigolds, nasturtiums and roses. Koki liked it this way because she could

KOKI'S SONG

wander about discovering flowers emerging from tall grass and thistles. A wall went round the garden, and on the other side of the wall a stretch of grassland went sloping down to the river-bed. A shallow stream ran along the middle of this otherwise dry watercourse. During the monsoon rains it was a rushing torrent, but just now it was a murmuring brook, with little silver fish darting about in the water.

Koki seldom went beyond the garden wall because across the river-bed was jungle, and wild animals frequently came down to the water to drink. The wild boar, who were often seen, frightened her. But once she saw a deer, quite close, moving about with supple grace and dignity. It was a chital, a spotted deer. Koki stared at the animal in fascination, and the deer must have become conscious of her gaze, for it looked up and stared back at Koki. What the deer saw was a small dark face, half-hidden by a lot of loose black hair, and two large brown eyes shining with wonder.

The deer and the girl stared at each other for two or three minutes, then somewhere a twig snapped and the startled deer went bounding away across the stream.

One evening Koki heard the distant music of a flute. She had not heard it before, and she looked over the wall to see where it came from.

A boy sat near the stream, playing on a flute, while his small herd of cows grazed on the slopes. He had a thin shawl thrown over his shoulders, his feet were bare, and his clothes dusty and torn. But Koki did not notice these things; she was enthralled by the simple, plaintive melody of the flute and, for her, the boy was a prince who made beautiful music.

She climbed up on the wall and sat there with her legs dangling over the other side. When the boy looked up and saw her, he rose and came nearer. He sat down on the grass about twenty metres from the wall, put the flute to his lips again and, with his eyes on Koki, continued his playing.

It reminded Koki of the day she and the deer had stared at each other, both fascinated, neither of them stirring or making a sound; only now it was for a much longer time, and one played while the other listened.

Next evening, Koki heard the flute again and was soon sitting astride the wall. When the boy saw Koki, he put down his flute and smiled at her, and then began playing again. That evening, besides playing and listening, all they did was smile at each other.

On the third evening Koki asked the boy his name. "Somi," he said, and he played on the flute and did not say another word.

But on the fourth evening he asked Koki her name, and she told him.

"I will make a song about you," he said, and he played the sweetest melody Koki had ever heard. She found herself putting words to it and singing softly:

"When you are far away,
I'll sing this song,
And in my heart you'll play
All summer long."

After that, Somi always played Koki's song.

It wasn't long before Koki came down from the wall, and sometimes she and Somi would walk up the river-

bed and paddle in the cold mountain water. They never said much to each other, and yet a lot seemed to have been said. Somi would leave at dusk, herding the cattle before him, calling each by a different name, and Koki would watch him go until he was a speck on the dusty road and the cow-bells tinkled distantly. She never knew where he came from or where he went. She thought she might ask him some day, but it didn't seem necessary.

One day Somi did not play the flute. Instead he put it in Koki's hands and said, "Keep it for me, I am going away for some time. To the summer pastures in the hills." He had come without his herd that day and, after he had given Koki the flute, he turned and ran fleet-footed across the grass that was now turning from green to brown.

Koki missed the boy, but she still had the flute. She tried playing on it sometimes, but she did not have the magic touch and all she achieved was a shrill, broken piping. But sometimes, when she was walking by herself along the dry river-bed, she thought she heard the music, sweet and low and all around her. She did not sing her song. She had made the words for Somi, and she would sing them for Somi when he returned – if ever he returned . . .

At night, when she lay awake, the flute seemed to play her song. It was as though the flute was actually playing by itself.

One day when Koki was at the river-bed, ankle-deep in water, the flute fell from her hands. It was carried into the middle of the stream and swept away. Koki ran

downstream, splashing through the water, stumbling frequently and wetting her clothes. She could see the flute bobbing up and down on the water, but it was getting further and further away, and soon she had to stop running because she was tired and far from home.

The flute was lost, and she did not hear its music any more.

Koki became quiet and listless. Grandmother complained that she could no longer interest the girl in her stories, so Koki tried hard to listen and pay attention, but her mind was always wandering to other things. No one really knew the reason for Koki's unhappiness; even Koki wasn't sure. Grandmother had of course seen Koki and the boy talking to each other but did not realise the strength of the bond between them.

Koki saw the deer once, when it came to the stream to drink. She was sitting on the wall, and the deer took one look at her and was so startled that it went bounding away into the forest.

And so another month passed. The mountain snows melted and the swollen stream came rushing down the valley and past the lonely old house. The garden was full of little green shoots, the grass was fresh and sweet, and the flame-tree was bursting into colour. Koki had grown a little taller, too.

She sat under a mango tree, watching the sunlight stalk the shadows on the wall. A couple of bulbuls were twittering away in a rose bush. Grandmother had told Koki that birds sang because they were happy, but what proof was there of that, Koki wondered? For all she

knew, birds could just as well be singing because they felt miserable.

And then, as though accompanying the song of the birds, came the music of a flute.

Koki heard it, and looked up and listened. There was no mistaking the melody. It was Koki's song. She pulled herself up on the wall and looked over.

Somi sat on the grass, playing a new flute, but looking as though he had been sitting there for ages. When he saw Koki, he put down his flute and smiled, and then began playing again.

That evening they walked together down to the edge of the stream, and she noticed that the herd was larger than before. Somi was wearing new clothes. He told her about the lush mountain meadow where he had taken the herd for the dry month; she told him that she would soon be returning to her school and home in the nearby town.

"Will you come again?" he asked.

"At the end of every month," she said. "My grandmother says I must come." But she knew that wasn't the only reason.

"I'll be here," said Somi simply, and played her song. And Koki sang to his music.



16 *The Great Train Journey*

Suraj waved to a passing train, and kept waving until only the spiralling smoke remained. He liked waving to trains. He wondered about the people in them, and about where they were going and what it would be like there. And when the train had passed, leaving behind only the hot, empty track, Suraj was lonely.

He was a little lonely now. His hands in his pockets, he wandered along the railway track, kicking at loose pebbles and sending them down the bank. Soon there were other tracks, a railway-siding, a stationary goods train.

Suraj walked the length of the goods train. The carriage doors were closed and, as there were no windows, he couldn't see inside. He looked around to

see if he was observed, and then, satisfied that he was alone, began trying the doors. He was almost at the end of the train when a carriage door gave way to his thrust.

It was dark inside the carriage. Suraj stood outside in the bright sunlight, peering into the darkness, trying to recognise bulky, shapeless objects. He stepped into the carriage and felt around. The objects were crates, and through the cross-section of woodwork he felt straw. He opened the other door and the sun streamed into the compartment, driving out the musty darkness.

Suraj sat down on a packing-case, his chin cupped in his hands. The school was closed for the summer holidays, and he had been wandering about all day and still did not know what to do with himself. The carriage was bare of any sort of glamour. Passing trains fascinated him – moving trains, crowded trains, shrieking, panting trains all fascinated him – but this smelly, dark compartment filled him only with gloom and more loneliness.

He did not really look gloomy or lonely. He looked fierce at times, when he glared out at people from under his dark eyebrows, but otherwise he usually wore a contented look – and no one could guess just how deep his thoughts were!

Perhaps, if he had company, some fun could be had in the carriage. If there had been a friend with him, someone like Ranji . . .

He looked at the crates. He was always curious about things that were bolted or nailed down or in some way concealed from him – things like parcels and locked rooms – and carriage doors and crates!

He went from one crate to another, and soon his

perseverance was rewarded. The cover of one hadn't been properly nailed down. Suraj got his fingers under the edge and prised up the lid. Absorbed in this operation, he did not notice the slight shudder that passed through the train.

He plunged his hands into the straw and pulled out an apple.

It was a dark, ruby-red apple, and it lay in the dusty palm of Suraj's hand like some gigantic precious stone, smooth and round and glowing in the sunlight. Suraj looked up, out of the doorway, and thought he saw a tree walking past the train.

He dropped the apple and stared.

There was another tree, and another, all walking past the door with increasing rapidity. Suraj stepped forward but lost his balance and fell on his hands and knees. The floor beneath him was vibrating, the wheels were clattering on the rails, the carriage was swaying. The trees were running now, swooping past the train, and the telegraph poles joined them in the crazy race.

Crouching on his hands and knees, Suraj stared out of the open door and realised that the train was moving, moving fast, moving away from his home and puffing into the unknown. He crept cautiously to the door and looked out. The ground seemed to rush away from the wheels. He couldn't jump. Was there, he wondered, any way of stopping the train? He looked around the compartment again: only crates of apples. He wouldn't starve, that was one consolation.

He picked up the apple he had dropped and pulled a crate nearer to the doorway. Sitting down, he took a bite from the apple and stared out of the open door.

"Greetings, friend," said a voice from behind, and Suraj spun round guiltily, his mouth full of apple.

A dirty, bearded face was looking out at him from behind a pile of crates. The mouth was open in a wide, paan-stained grin.

"Er – namaste," said Suraj apprehensively. "Who are you?"

The man stepped out from behind the crates and confronted the boy.

"I'll have one of those, too," he said, pointing to the apple.

Suraj gave the man an apple, and stood his ground while the carriage rocked on the rails. The man took a step forward, lost his balance, and sat down on the floor.

"And where are you going, friend?" he asked. "Have you a ticket?"

"No," said Suraj. "Have you?"

The man pulled at his beard and mused upon the question but did not answer it. He took a bite from the apple and said, "No, I don't have a ticket. But I usually reserve this compartment for myself. This is the first time I've had company. Where are you going? Are you a hippy like me?"

"I don't know," said Suraj. "Where does this train go?"

The scruffy ticketless traveller looked concerned for a moment, then smiled and said, "Where do you want to go?"

"I want to go everywhere," said Suraj. "I want to go to England and China and Africa and Greenland. I want to go all over the world!"

"Then you're on the right train," said the man. "This

train goes everywhere. First it will take you to the sea, and there you will have to get on a ship if you want to go to China."

"How do I get on a ship?" asked Suraj.

The man, who had been fumbling about in the folds and pockets of his shabby clothes, produced a packet of bidis and a box of matches, and began smoking the aromatic leaf.

"Can you cook?" he asked.

"Yes," said Suraj untruthfully.

"Can you scrub a deck?"

"Why not?"

"Can you sail a ship?"

"I can sail anything."

"Then you'll get to China," said the man.

He leant back against a crate, stuck his dirty feet up on another crate, and puffed contentedly at his bidi.

Suraj finished his apple, took another from the crate, and dug his teeth into it. He took aim with the core of the old apple and tried to hit a telegraph pole, but missed it by metres; it wasn't the same as throwing a cricket ball. Then, to make the apple more interesting, he began to take big bites to see if he could devour it in three mouthfuls. But it took him four bites to finish the apple, so he started on another.

Suraj had always wanted to be in a train, a train that would take him to strange new places, over hundreds and hundreds of kilometres. And here was a train doing just that, and he wasn't quite sure if it was what he really wanted . . .

The train was coming to a station. The engine whistled,

slowed down. The number of railway lines increased, crossed, spread out in different directions. Before the train could come to a stop, Suraj's companion came to the door and jumped to the ground.

"You'd better keep out of sight if you don't want to be caught!" he called. And waving his hand, he disappeared into the jungle across the railway tracks.

The train was at a siding. Suraj couldn't see any signs of life, but he heard voices and the sound of carriage doors being opened and closed. He suspected that the apples wouldn't stay in the compartment much longer, so he stuffed one into each pocket, and climbed on to a wooden rack in a corner.

Presently men's voices were heard in the doorway. Two labourers stepped into the compartment and began moving the crates towards the door, where they were taken over by others. Soon the compartment was empty.

Suraj waited until the men had gone away before coming down from the rack. After about five minutes the train started again. It shunted up and down, then gathered speed and went rushing across the plain.

Suraj felt a thrill of anticipation. Where would they be going now? He wondered what his parents would do when he failed to come home that night; they would think he had run away, or been kidnapped, or been involved in an accident. They would have the police out and there would be search parties. Suraj would be famous: the boy who disappeared!

The train came out of the jungle and passed fields of sugar-cane and villages of mud huts. Children shouted and waved to the train, though there was no one in it

except Suraj, the guard and the engine-driver. Suraj waved back. Usually he was in a field, waving; today, he was actually on the train.

He was beginning to enjoy the ride. The train would take him to the sea. There would be ships with funnels and ships with sails, and there might even be one to take him across the ocean to some distant land. He felt a bit sorry for his mother and father – they *would* miss him . . . they would believe he had been lost for ever . . . ! But one day, a fortune made, he would return home and then nobody would care any more about school reports and what he ate and why he came home late . . . Ranji would be waiting for him at the station, and Suraj would bring him back a present – an African lion, perhaps, or a transistor-radio . . . But he wished Ranji was with him now; he wished the ragged hippy was still with him. An adventure was always more fun when one had company.

He had finished both apples by the time the train showed signs of reaching another station. This time it seemed to be moving into the station itself, not just a siding. It passed a lot of signals and buildings and advertisement-boards before slowing to a halt beside a wide, familiar platform.

Suraj looked out of the door and caught sight of the board bearing the station's name. He was so astonished that he almost fell out of the compartment. He was back in his home town! After travelling forty or fifty kilometres, here he was, home again.

He couldn't understand it. The train hadn't turned, of that he was certain; and it hadn't been moving backwards, he was certain of that, too. He climbed out of the compartment and looked up and down the

platform. Yes, the engine had changed ends! It was only the local apple train.

Suraj glowered angrily at everyone on the platform. It was as though the rest of the world had played a trick on him.

He made his way to the waiting-room and slipped into the street through the back door. He did not want a ticket-collector asking him awkward questions. It had been a free ride, and with that he comforted himself. Shrugging his shoulders, Suraj sauntered down the road to the bazaar. Some day, he thought, he'd take a train and really go somewhere; and he'd buy a ticket, just to make sure of getting there.

"I'm going everywhere," he said fiercely. "I'm going everywhere, and no one can stop me!"

Glossary

banyan tree	the Indian fig, whose branches root themselves like new trees over a large area
barsati	small room on top of a flat roof
bidis	rolled tobacco leaves, smoked by the less well-off
carom	similar to shuffleboard or shovelboard, an indoor game
chaat shop	a roadside stall selling snacks, mostly hot and spicy
chappals	leather-thonged sandals or slippers

THE ROAD TO THE BAZAAR

dhobi	washerman
flying foxes	fruit-eating bats
jalebis	sweetmeats, shaped like figures of eight, made from flour and syrup
lichi (or litchi)	a tropical fruit of sweet, watery pulp, covered with a rough, red skin
luddoos	ball-shaped sweetmeats made from sugar and flour
maidaan	open parkland or public ground
namaste	form of greeting in which the palms of the hands are joined and raised to the forehead
paan	betel leaf, chewed to sweeten the breath, and used as a digestive
paan-seller	specialises in betel-leaf preparations
pahlwan	wrestler, strong man
paisa	a coin; a hundred paisas to the rupee
pakorras	fried butter balls, containing sliced vegetables
peepal	another Indian fig tree, held sacred, and often found near temples and shrines
sal tree	forest tree, whose wood is used in furniture-making

GLOSSARY

samosas	puffs made from flour and filled with spiced vegetables
shisham tree	also known as the Bombay Rosewood, a large forest tree yielding one of the most valuable timbers of India
tamarind tree	large tropical tree, its pod filled with reddish-black pulp
tonga	pony-drawn, two-wheeled carriage